

Chapter 8

The Easter Event

A Conventional Modern View

“Take the central act of Christian worship: the Eucharist, or Holy Communion. The first three gospels — Matthew, Mark and Luke — say that Jesus instituted the Eucharist on the eve of his death, during the Jewish festival known as Pesach or Passover. There are many problems about believing that the Last Supper was a Passover meal. In order to believe it, you have to suppose that the high priests and the Jerusalem hierarchy were prepared to suspend the Pesach, to interrupt all the ceremonies in the temple in order to hold a trial supervised by Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator. Why would they do that, rather than waiting until after the feast and keeping the malefactors in prison? The fourth gospel makes no reference to the institution of the Eucharist and, instead, has him dying on the cross at the moment when the Passover lambs are being killed in the temple. How did both these gospel narratives — the Last Supper as Passover meal or, alternatively, Jesus as Passover lamb — come to be written, when neither could possibly have been historically accurate?”¹

This may seem like a trivial point to many: did Christ die on the Passover Meal, or on the Passover Preparation Day, or during the Passover period? Was He the Passover sacrifice, or was He celebrating Passover? I am told time and again by many sceptics that if the Gospels can't even get this right, then how can we even begin to believe the whole Crucifixion story of Christ being the Paschal Lamb? How can we believe that the unleavened bread, served at the Last Super and served at all Eucharists since, represents the sinlessness of Christ? It follows that if it did not happen that way, then the one off sacrifice made for all of us, for our sins, which marked the end of the Old Covenant, to be replaced with the New, then the New Jonah with His three day Resurrection did not happen as told. The suggestion that the symbolism – from Israel being freed from Egyptian bondage, to Christ freeing mankind from its bondage, the Paschal Lamb (unblemished and perfect) being killed (with no bones broken) to Jesus being killed for

¹ <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f5b0415c-d7a8-11e4-849b-00144feab7de.html#axzz3XQtH2aqf> I would urge you to read this article. Much of what the author holds to be true, I dispute in this book and also in my Book One in this series: “Against Atheism: The Case for God”.

all our sins, just does not make sense if the dates don't work. But before I look at this in more detail, it is worthwhile to explore what the Bible tells us about Passover dating.

Passover History

Exodus 12 and 13 lays out the history of the Passover.

In Exodus 12:5-7 Moses gives this instruction to the Israeli captives:

"Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats. Now you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month. Then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it at twilight."

This is the 14th day of Nisan, which starts after sunset and finishes at sunrise the following day. Now, it is not specified if this is an evening twilight or a morning one. However, the setting is Moses advising to eat in haste that evening: don't hang around; make sure your doors are marked as the God will be 'passing over' and will protect those inside doors which have been marked. Therefore we can only assume a twilight slaughter of the lambs at the end of the day of the 14th day of Nisan, which, in our calendar and that of the Romans at the time of Christ, would be on the following day.

From the 14th Day of Nisan, Moses tells us in Exodus 12:14-15

'So this day shall be to you a memorial; and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord throughout your generations. You shall keep it as a feast by an everlasting ordinance. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses. For whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel.'

This 'first day' is the 14th Day of Nisan, the start of the Passover process. Note: you were also instructed to prepare your house for the Passover meal by clearing out anything which could be associated with leavened bread and its by-products. On that first day, you would only have been eating unleavened bread and preparing for the Passover meal the following day.

Exodus 12:17-18 tells us the following:

“So you shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread, for on this same day I will have brought your armies out of the land of Egypt. Therefore you shall observe this day throughout your generations as an everlasting ordinance. In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread, until the twenty-first day of the month at evening.”

It is slightly confusing here, as Moses says the Feast of Unleavened Bread happened on the day the slaves were taken out of Egypt, which would have been the day following the Passover Feast, if taken literally. Or did Moses mean the day the process started? That would then put it back to the first day, the 14th Day of Nisan, which Moses does, actually, then clearly confirm. Another notable thing about this Passover Feast is that no bones of the lamb were to be broken (verse 46). If Jesus was the sacrificial lamb (an unblemished one, as was required for sacrifice), although the Jews asked for his bones to be broken to speed up his death as the Sabbath approached, this was not, in the event needed, because at that stage He was dead already.

Leviticus 23:5 would appear to slightly amend this tradition:

“On the fourteenth day of the first month at twilight is the Lord’s Passover” And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the Lord; seven days you must eat unleavened bread.”

Numbers 28:16-17 would seem to create a clear and separate date for the Feast of the Unleavened Bread:

“On the fourteenth day of the first month is the Passover of the Lord. And on the fifteenth day of this month is the feast; unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days.”

In Deuteronomy, we go back to the position of Exodus, that of the first day of Passover being a day when you must not eat leavened bread, and that at twilight on that day, you conduct the slaughter of the lamb in remembrance of the Passover liberation. Deuteronomy 16:4 is clear on this point:

“And no leaven shall be seen among you in all your territory for seven days, nor shall any of the meat which you sacrifice the first day at twilight remain overnight until morning.”

As I have established, the end of the first day was marked by the slaughter of the lamb, and the evening of the second day was the Passover Feast. This would make the prohibition of not eating ‘leaven’ bread on the first day also. The Passover period and that of the Feast of Unleavened Bread may well start at the same time. The Passover meal is on the evening of the 2nd day. If they do not, then, for sure, the Passover’s first day is the 14th day of Nisan - and on that day, you would spend the day preparing for the Passover meal by cleaning out your house of all the leaven products and only eating the unleavened products.

In 2 Chronicles 30:14-15 we see King Hezekiah and his people, after 200 odd years of the Jews not observing the Passover and worshiping false idols, keeping both the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This was done according to the commands of Moses during the Exodus period and in accordance with the Deuteronomic time line (albeit it one month late!):

“Now many people, a very great assembly, gathered at Jerusalem to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread in the second month. They arose and took away the altars that were in Jerusalem, and they took away all the incense altars and cast them into the Brook Kidron. Then they slaughtered the Passover lambs on the fourteenth day of the second month. The priests and the Levites were ashamed, and sanctified themselves, and brought the burnt offerings to the house of the Lord.”

This implies that the feast of Unleavened bread, in accordance with both Exodus and Deuteronomy, had started, so that at the end of the first day, which would be into the second day on our modern calendar (*from midnight to midnight, as opposed to the Jewish evening twilight to twilight*), the lambs are sacrificed.

King Josiah in 2 Chronicles 35: 16-17, some 400 years after the last proper (month 1, 14th day of the month) Passover celebrations, also confirms that there is a preparation day for the Passover, the sacrifice of the lambs happening at the end of that day and the eating on the evening of the new day:

“So all the service of the Lord was prepared the same day, to keep the Passover and to offer burnt offerings on the altar of the Lord, according to the command of King Josiah. And the children of Israel who were present kept the Passover at that time, and the Feast of Unleavened Bread for seven days.”

The Synoptic Gospels of Matthew 26:17-19, Mark 14:12-16 and Luke 22:7-13 represent Jesus as celebrating the Passover, which most take to mean the Passover Meal, which would *appear* to be celebrated on the Friday night, according to the modern conventional view.

Matthew 26:17-19:

“Now on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying to Him, “Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?” And He said, “Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, “The Teacher says, “My time is at hand; I will keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.” So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover.”

So. If we understand the Feast of Unleavened Bread takes place on the 15th of Nisan, after sunset or on the Friday evening, thus pushing the execution onto the Sabbath day, this would render this verse of Matthew as wrong. It's a incorrect interpretation, though, as we know the Jews were involved with the death of Jesus and that they would not have worked on the Sabbath. All the Gospel accounts cite the involvement of the Jews. The preparation day is the 14th when the Passover period had started, and this Gospel writer suggests they are making preparation for the Passover itself, one day in the future, on the 15th Nisan, which would be in accordance with their tradition stemming from the events originally reported by Moses in Exodus and reconfirmed in Deuteronomy, But in the two books of the Bible in between Leviticus and Numbers, a day is clearly demarcated for the Feast of the Unleavened Bread to start on the 15th of Nisan, which would run alongside the eating of the Passover meal itself. Jesus says he will “Keep the Passover at your house” which is consistent with being there on the 14th. He does not commit to having the Passover meal, but He does eat what they are preparing, with the unleavened bread (representing sinlessness or purity), at the Last Super. This Last Super was the first meal of the day, dinner, for the Jewish people, as opposed to westerners who have

breakfast as their first meal of the day. The Galileans called this the *seudah maphsehket*² which translates as the Last Super. It was to celebrate the first born who were saved by the Lord as he passed-over their properties, not spreading disease for them as He did for the Egyptians. The meal would be unleavened bread (as was recorded in the Gospels), as at the Last Super of Christ. The fast would last until the Passover meal the next day. This meal that Christ had at the Last Super was never the Passover meal - that was 24 hours later, the first meal of the new day, when he was dead. As He had predicted.

Mark 14:12,16:

*"Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they killed the Passover lamb, His disciples said to Him, "Where do You want us to go and prepare, that You may eat the Passover?"
So His disciples went out, and came into the city, and found it just as He had said to them; and they prepared the Passover."*

If the first day of Unleavened Bread for Mark is the preparation day, as it was of old, then at the end of that day, as we have seen, the Passover Lamb would have been slaughtered and Mark would appear to be consistent with this timing. I don't believe you can read this any other way. Why? The Passover lamb was always killed when the sun was setting on the end of the first day, or the 14th of Nisan. Mark, like Matthew, places this event (the Feast of Unleavened Bread) on the 1st day, and not the second day (the 15th of Nisan). It should also be noted that Mark, in 15:42-47, also reports that Joseph of Arimathea, *on Preparation Day, on the eve of the Sabbath*, goes to Pilate to ask permission to collect the body, *before the Passover meal itself starts*.

Luke 22:7-9,13:

² "Mishnah", Tractate Pesachim Chapter 4 Mishnah 5:

*"The sages say in Judah they use to do work on the eve of Passover until noon (work would be permitted until noon on the fourteenth of Nisan), **but in Galilee (among Galileans) they would not work at all (on the fourteenth of Nisan)**. On the evening (after sundown on the thirteenth), the school of Shammai forbade (work), but the school of Hillel permitted it until sunrise."*

“Then came the Day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover must be killed. And He sent Peter and John, saying, ‘Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat’. So they said to Him, ‘Where do You want us to prepare?’

“So they went and found it just as He had said to them, and they prepared the Passover.”

Luke would also be consistent with this timeline if the Feast of Unleavened Bread were the first day when they were commanded not to eat the leaven, so they could be ritually free of sin, which of course the unleavened bread symbolised. The Passover lamb was killed, according to Matthew and Mark, on that same, very first day of the Passover: the 14th of Nisan.

John, a witness and participant in the Last Supper, is very specific and says Jesus was crucified on the 14th day, preceding the legal time of the Jewish Paschal supper. For John, the Passover celebration was still to come, ie, on the Friday night. John 13:1-2:

“Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. And supper being ended, the devil having already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray Him,”

The Passover Meal, was held on the evening of the 15th Nisan. It is the date according to John, and indeed all the Gospel writers. John 19:13-14:

“When Pilate³ therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus out and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, ‘Behold your King!’”

Our other witness and attendee at the Last Super was Peter, who records as follows (1 Peter 1:18-19):

³ We also know from Luke 23:7, that Jesus also needed to be seen by Herod at the time, who was fortunately in Jerusalem. I mention this here as it is often said this is fiction, because Herod was stationed nearly a day’s travel away - which would blow apart any of the Easter timing. Luke is the only Gospel writer to mention this.

“ ... knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.”

It was predicted 800 years before this, and in accordance with the scripture (Isaiah 53:7-9):

“He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment, And who will declare His generation?

For He was cut off from the land of the living; For the transgressions of My people He was stricken.

And they made His grave with the wicked— But with the rich at His death, Because He had done no violence, Nor was any deceit in His mouth.”

He also clearly viewed Christ to be the paschal lamb, slaughtered at the same time, at the end of the first day, twilight, Nisan 14, as all the Gospel writers attest to.

The next day is the trial at mid-day on the 14th (we are now into our Friday). By 3 pm, Jesus has been crucified and is dead. This is three hours before the start of the Passover Meal at 6 pm on the 15th, going into the Sabbath day itself: from Friday night through all of Saturday to 6 pm. After His burial the women then rest and do not attend the tomb, as it is unlawful to work on that day. So 14th Nisan would correspond to the Thursday night from 6pm to the Friday evening of 6 pm. This places Thursday night as the night of the Last Supper, or Paschal preparation feast. Friday night, then, going into Saturday, is the Passover Feast and Sabbath, a doubly important day. Jesus, unblemished and with no bones broken, is slaughtered as the sun was going down, before twilight, as the unbroken tradition of Passover tells us the Passover Lambs were. The Passover Meal is then celebrated on the Friday evening of the 15th. Jesus is in the tomb until the Resurrection on the Sunday. This is also the Day of First Fruits - Resurrection Day - before our sunrise on the Sunday morning. Paul, a well- trained Pharisee, picks up on this point 1 Corinthians 15:20:

“But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep”

Leviticus 23:11 tells us the First Fruits was always *after* the Sabbath. Paul would have well understood the meaning of this:

"He shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, to be accepted on your behalf; on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it"

In this particular year, the Sabbath was held on the 15th Nisan - the Resurrection of Jesus, the first fruits, happened on 16th Nisan the day after the double, or high, Sabbath, on the first day of the new week: Sunday. This is the fulfilment of scripture.

On my reading, there is no conflict with the Easter story between all four Gospel writers, as opposed to what is perceived today by many modern scholars and commentators. The Gospel writers clearly knew of the preparation day and counted this as part of the celebrations, as did their ancestors. The Galilean contingent also had their own Last Super (unleavened bread meal), to remember the act of God in saving their first born sons, then fasted until the next day when the Passover Feast was celebrated, with the lamb slaughtered the day before that on the first day. That the counting after these times favours the start of the Feast of Unleavened Bread on the 15th has no bearing on these Synoptic writers: they all clearly state that they were preparing for the feast, with the lambs being slaughtered at the end of that first day and not the second. The Last Super and the Passover Feast were two very different events.