

Was Friday a Preparation Day for the Passover Meal?

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All the Gospels state that Jesus ate the Last Supper the day before his crucifixion (Mt. 26:20; Mk. 14:17; Lk. 22:14; Jn. 13:2; cf. also 1 Cor. 11:23). The Synoptic Gospels (Mt. 26:17; Mk. 14:12; Lk. 22:7-8) portray the Last Supper as the Passover meal celebrated on Thursday evening, with Jesus crucified the following day, namely, Friday, or 15 Nisan on the Jewish calendar. It seems, then, that Jesus' disciples entered the city shortly after noon on Thursday, 14 Nisan, procured the room, took a lamb to the temple court and killed it, roasted it with bitter herbs (Exod 12:8-9), and made other arrangements for the meal, including the purchase of wine and unleavened bread. Mt. 26:19 explicitly says that they "prepared the Passover." After nightfall on Thursday evening, when it was 15 Nisan, Jesus joined his disciples and they ate the Passover. On these points the Synoptics agree; and this places Jesus' death on Friday, 15 Nisan, probably about 3:00 P.M.

John, however, states that the Jews who took Jesus to the Pilate's palace did not enter it "in order that they might not be defiled but might eat the Passover" (Jn. 18:28) and that Jesus' trial was on the "day of preparation for the Passover" (Jn. 19:14). Many scholars interpret John to mean that the Last Supper was not a Passover meal and that Jesus was tried and crucified on Friday afternoon 14 Nisan when the Passover lambs were slaughtered in preparation for the evening Passover meal.

On the assumption that John and the Synoptics present conflicting statements, several theories have been proposed in an attempt to reconcile the data:

1) The Last Supper was not a Passover meal but a private celebration the night before the Passover, either a prayer-of-sanctification meal or a religious-fellowship meal.

2) The Last Supper was a Passover meal celebrated on two consecutive days because it would have been impossible to slay all the Passover lambs on one day.

3) The Last Supper was a Passover meal but celebrated according to a solar calendar (such as the one used at Qumran) rather than the standard lunar calendar.

4) The Last Supper was a Passover meal but celebrated differently by Galileans (and Pharisees) and Judeans (and Sadducees). The Passover meal was celebrated on Thursday evening by Jesus, his disciples, and other Galileans; whereas, the priestly authorities and other Sadducees shared the Passover meal on Friday evening.

The lack of evidence for consecutive days of Passover sacrifices required by these theories is troubling; moreover, all four Gospels portray a meal with Passover features. The traditional harmony of John with the Synoptics, preferred in the history of interpretation, has much to commend it, namely, the Gospels concur in speaking of one Passover meal on Friday 15 Nisan.

First, in speaking of the day of Jesus' crucifixion, Jn. 19:14 literally reads, "It was preparation of the Passover" (Gk., *paraskeue tou pascha*). Abundant evidence suggests that *paraskeue* ("preparation [day]") had already become a technical name for Friday, the day when one normally prepared for the Sabbath (Saturday). On this view, *tou pascha* means "of Passover

Week” or “of the Passover festival”; therefore, John refers to the Friday in Passover week not to the preparation for the Passover meal (cf. Luke 22:1: “the Feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover”).

Second, the traditional explanation is that the meal was the customary Passover feast, and this can claim the support of the Gospel records, both the Synoptics (Mk. 14:1-2, 12-16) and John (13:21-30). The distinguishing features of the Passover meal are found in the narratives—reclining at the table, the distribution of alms, use of the ‘sop’ dipped in bitter sauce as a memorial, prayers, shared cups, and hymns. The objection that the lamb is missing obscures the typology of the Lamb who is about to pour out his blood (cf. 1 Cor. 5:7)

If John speaks of the Passover meal, what are we to make of his statement that the Jews in order to avoid ceremonial uncleanness did not enter Pilate’s palace because they wanted to be able “to eat the Passover” (18:28)? There are two plausible explanations: 1) the priests had intended to eat the Passover meal that night; but unexplained circumstances such as protracted judicial proceedings had caused a delay, or 2) the phrase “to eat the Passover” indicates a meal to be eaten during the feast week that followed. This latter point lacks clear evidence but is more likely than competing solutions.

— *Bruce Corley, president of the B.H. Carroll Theological Institute*