

**The Mystery of the
Last Supper**
Reconstructing
the Final Days of Jesus

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3 The problem of the last supper

And he [Jesus] said to them [his disciples at the last supper], 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer' . . . Then seizing him, they [the temple guard] led him away and took him into the house of the high priest [Caiaphas].

(Luke 22:15, 54)

Then the Jews led Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness the Jews did not enter the palace; they wanted to be able to eat the Passover.

(John 18:28)

These passages from Luke and John strikingly illustrate the problem of the time and nature of the last supper. The verse from John seems to follow on from the verses from Luke, except that the Feast of Passover has been shifted from *before* the arrest and trials of Jesus to *after* these events. If Jesus had already eaten the Passover with his disciples before his arrest and trials (Luke, and also Matthew and Mark), how was it that the Jews were still waiting to eat the Passover after his arrest and trials (John)? This looks like a straight contradiction and, as I have written earlier, it has puzzled biblical scholars for centuries. In this chapter we will examine some of the solutions that have been proposed. First, I want to explore in detail the apparent disagreement between the gospels about the last supper.

THE LAST SUPPER IN JOHN

John appears to say that the last supper, the trials of Jesus and the crucifixion were *all* before the Passover meal. Concerning the last supper, John writes: 'It was just before the Passover Feast . . . The evening meal was being served' (John 13:1, 2). This 'evening meal' is

the last meal John records Jesus having before his crucifixion. The description John gives of events at this meal makes it clear that the meal is the same occasion as the last supper described by the synoptic gospels. For example, both John and the synoptics describe Jesus dipping a piece of bread in a dish and then giving this to the traitor Judas. In addition, in all four gospels the meal was held at night, whereas a normal evening meal was held in the late afternoon. However, John explicitly states that this meal was 'just before the Passover Feast'.

Following the last supper, Jesus was arrested and John makes the statement quoted at the start of this chapter (John 18:28). It is clear from this verse that, according to John, the trials of Jesus before the high priest, Caiaphas, and the Roman governor, Pilate, occurred before the Jews who had arrested him had eaten their Passover meal. In addition, at the end of the trial by Pilate, John states: 'It was the day of Preparation for the Passover' (John 19:14). Thus John says that the last supper *and* the trials of Jesus were before the Passover.

After Jesus had been crucified, John writes: 'Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down' (John 19:31). What is meant by 'special Sabbath'? The Old Testament book of Leviticus tells us that on the fifteenth day of the first month of the Jewish religious year, Nisan (corresponding to March/April), the Israelites were to 'hold a sacred assembly and do no regular work' (Leviticus 23:7). The Passover meal was eaten after sunset, at the start of Nisan 15,¹ so Leviticus indicates that this day was a day of rest which came to be called the Sabbath of the Passover. Nisan 15 could fall on any day of the week (just as April 15, say, can fall on any day of the week), but when it happened to fall on the normal weekly Sabbath, it was called a special Sabbath.² Such a conjunction of weekly Sabbath and annual Passover still occurs in the Jewish calendar. John calls the day after the crucifixion a special Sabbath because in the year of the crucifixion the regular Sabbath, from Friday evening to Saturday evening, happened to coincide with the Passover Sabbath, on Nisan 15. Hence, according to John, the crucifixion was on Nisan 14, the day before the Passover meal.

In summary, John consistently says that the last supper (John 13:1, 2), the trials of Jesus (John 18:28 and 19:14) and the crucifixion (John 19:31) were all *before* the Passover meal. The natural interpretation of John is that the crucifixion occurred on Nisan 14, and the Passover meal followed at the evening start of the next Jewish day, on Nisan 15.

THE LAST SUPPER IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

Matthew, Mark and Luke appear to tell a very different story from John. According to Mark 14:12, 'On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"' The disciples then prepared the Passover meal (Mark 14:16) and that evening Jesus ate this last supper with his disciples (Mark 14:17-18). Matthew and Luke tell a similar story to Mark, and Luke records Jesus poignantly saying as he eats the meal: 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer' (Luke 22:15). Notice that, according to the synoptics, *both* the disciples of Jesus and Jesus himself call the last supper the Passover.

The time of the Passover meal in the year of the crucifixion

After the last supper	John
After the trials of Jesus	John
After the crucifixion	John
At the time of the last supper	Synoptic gospels

An obvious interpretation of the synoptic gospels is that the last supper really was a Passover meal, eaten at Passover meal time in the evening at the start of Nisan 15, with the crucifixion occurring later that Jewish day (i.e. still on Nisan 15, since the Jewish day runs from sunset to sunset). This disagrees with the Nisan 14 date of the

crucifixion indicated by John. Thus the synoptics and John appear to disagree directly on whether the last supper was a Passover meal *and* over the date of the crucifixion.

Jesus' inner circle of twelve disciples were all present at the last supper. Afterwards, they might have forgotten minor details but surely they would have remembered if it was a Passover meal or not. Hence there were a significant number of reliable eye-witnesses to the nature of the last supper. This is what makes the apparent disagreement among the gospels so surprising. However, is it possible that, as I suggested in the [first chapter](#), the synoptics and John are actually in agreement, and that I, and others, have misunderstood what they were trying to say? Indeed, are there clues in the gospels themselves as to why they apparently disagree? Clues that would have been understood by their original audience, so that all four gospels would have been consistent, but which, two thousand years later, we no longer understand? I believe there are, and we will find these 'hidden clues', and their meaning, in later chapters.

For now, let us consider the core problem: the real or apparent disagreement between the synoptics and John over the date and nature of the last supper. Was it a Passover meal or not? Biblical scholars have wrestled with this for centuries and they hold a wide range of views. I will summarise the main interpretations below.

POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE LAST SUPPER

There are four main interpretations of the last supper given by biblical scholars:³

1 The synoptics are right and John is wrong

On this interpretation the last supper was a Passover meal held in the evening at the start of Nisan 15, and the crucifixion occurred later that Jewish day, on Nisan 15. In a classic book, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, the New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias has argued particularly powerfully that the last supper was a Passover meal,⁴ and his views have strong support. I have consulted a large number of biblical commentaries

on the gospels. Very many scholars believe the synoptics are right and that John is mistaken about the date and nature of the last supper.

Scholars who believe that John is wrong about the date and nature of the last supper argue that he was motivated more by theological than by historical considerations. For example, C. K. Barrett writes: 'John's interests were theological rather than chronological ... He did not hesitate to repress, revise, rewrite, or rearrange.'⁵ In particular, such scholars suggest it was important theologically for John that Jesus died at the time the Passover lambs were being slain, since John's gospel earlier portrays Jesus as being the Lamb of God (John 1:29). These scholars argue that John therefore placed the crucifixion on Nisan 14, the day the Passover lambs were slain, for the sake of theological symbolism rather than historical fact.

2 John can be interpreted to fit the synoptics

Many scholars believe that the synoptics are right in identifying the last supper as a Passover meal and that John has not distorted history but, correctly interpreted, agrees with the synoptics. For example, Don Carson argues that when John writes 'It was just before the Passover Feast ... the evening meal was being served' (John 13:1, 2), we have to remember that at this meal Jesus washed his disciples' feet (John 13:3-12). Carson argues that the foot washing would have occurred just before the meal started, so John is really saying that just before the Passover Feast Jesus washed his disciples' feet and then he sat down to eat the Passover with them.⁶

How do such scholars interpret John 18:28, which says that for reasons of ceremonial uncleanness, the Jews at the trials of Jesus did not enter Pontius Pilate's palace since they wanted to be able to eat the Passover? Carson writes: 'It is tempting here to understand *to eat the Passover* to refer, not to the Passover meal itself, but to the continuing Feast of Unleavened Bread, which continued for seven days. There is ample evidence that "the Passover" could refer to the combined feast of the paschal meal itself plus the ensuing Feast of Unleavened Bread.'⁷ So Carson argues that 'to eat the Passover' refers not to the Passover meal itself but to a later and less important meal in Passover week.

Concerning John 19:31, that Jesus was crucified the day before a special Sabbath, Carson and others (for example Craig Blomberg) argue that the term 'a special Sabbath' simply meant that the regular weekly Sabbath fell in Passover week and not that the weekly Sabbath coincided with the special Passover day of rest on Nisan 15.⁸

In summary, many scholars believe that the synoptics are right that the last supper was a Passover meal, and that John can be interpreted to agree with them. According to this theory, as with interpretation 1 above, the last supper was held in the evening at the start of Nisan 15, and the crucifixion occurred later that Jewish day, still Nisan 15.

3 The last supper was a Passover-like meal

Some scholars have proposed that the last supper described by the synoptics was not a strict Passover meal, but it was a Passover-like meal. For example, John Meier writes: 'Sensing or suspecting that his enemies were closing in for an imminent, final attack, and therefore taking into account that he might not be able to celebrate the coming Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus instead arranged a solemn farewell meal just before Passover ... The supper, though not a Passover meal ... would naturally be both solemn and religious, accompanied by all the formalities that Jeremias uses to prove the Passover nature of the supper.'⁹ Similarly, Tom Wright, the Anglican Bishop of Durham, UK, calls the last supper a 'quasi-Passover'.¹⁰ These scholars, and others, suggest that Jesus, knowing of, or suspecting, his imminent arrest, held a Passover-like meal on the evening before the official Passover. Supporters of this theory interpret Luke 22:15, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer', to refer to the specially brought-forward Passover-like meal that they were about to have. Scholars who favour this interpretation note that the Passover lamb is the centrepiece of a real Passover meal, yet the synoptics make no mention of a Passover lamb being slain, roasted and eaten at the last supper. This interpretation of the synoptics is in broad agreement with John's gospel in which the last supper is explicitly stated to have occurred before the Feast of Passover (John 13:1). The timing also agrees, so on this theory all four gospels have the last supper on the

evening at the start of Nisan 14, with the crucifixion later that Jewish day. A significant minority of biblical scholars support this interpretation.

4 The different calendar theory

The official Jewish calendar at the time of Jesus in the first century AD is described by the Jewish historian Josephus.¹¹ In this calendar, Passover time was specified precisely; Josephus records that the slaughtering of the lambs for the Passover meal occurred at the temple in Jerusalem between the ninth and eleventh hours (that is between 3 p.m. and 5 p.m.) on the fourteenth day of Nisan. The Passover meal commenced after sunset that evening, that is, at the start of Nisan 15, since the Jewish day runs from evening to evening. There is a striking scene in the play version of *Fiddler on the Roof* in which a Jewish family goes to the Jerusalem temple and their Passover lamb is slaughtered. They return home, stand on the flat top of their house and watch the sun go down. They turn around, watch the full Passover moon rise, then go down from the roof and joyfully eat their Passover meal. The fifteenth day of the month is at full moon time, since the first day of the month is the day of the new crescent moon, and a lunar month is either twenty-nine or thirty days long.

In addition to the official Jewish calendar, we know from the Dead Sea Scrolls, found in caves by Qumran close to the Dead Sea and then sold (see Fig. 3.1), that the Jewish community at Qumran used a solar calendar in which the year had 364 days. This year was divided into four quarters of 91 days each, and each quarter had three months of length 30, 30 and 31 days. In 1957, a French scholar, Annie Jaubert, ingeniously proposed that Jesus held the last supper at Passover time according to this calendar.¹² A clever feature of the calendar is that their year of 364 days divides exactly into fifty-two weeks of seven days each. This means that a given *date*, for example, Nisan 14, always fell on the same *day* of the week each year, which was very convenient. (Think how convenient it would be for us if December 25 fell on the same day of the week every year.) Also, the Qumran community day ran from sunrise to sunrise, because they used a solar calendar. We

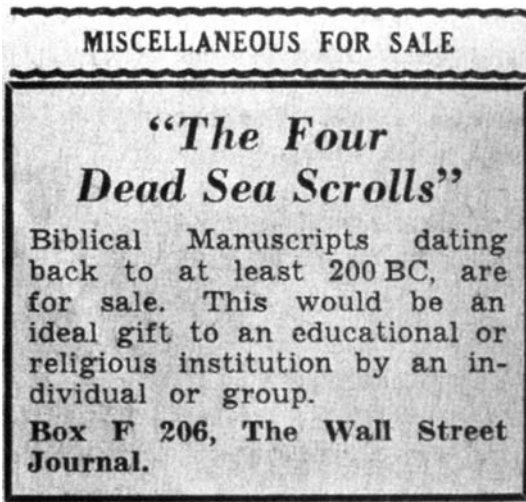


Fig. 3.1 Advertisement in the June 1, 1954, *Wall Street Journal* in which some Dead Sea Scrolls went up for sale.

know from the Dead Sea Scrolls that the Qumran community had their annual Passover meal on Nisan 14, which for them was always a *Tuesday* evening.

Jaubert proposed that Jesus held the last supper with his disciples on Tuesday evening, according to the Qumran calendar, and he was crucified a few days later on Friday. She suggested that the synoptic gospels used the Qumran calendar, so they correctly described the last supper as a real, not a quasi, Passover meal held at Passover time (in the Qumran calendar). John, on the other hand, used the official Jewish calendar and so he correctly described the last supper as occurring before the official Passover. According to this theory, all four gospels give Nisan 14, in the official calendar, as the crucifixion date.

Other 'different calendar' theories exist, summarised by Howard Marshall¹³ and Harold Hoehner.¹⁴ However, most biblical scholars are not convinced by any of the different calendar theories proposed so far, including that of Jaubert, and only a small minority of scholars support a different calendar theory (although the Pope has recently spoken in

favour of the different calendar theory of Jaubert. I will consider his words in [Chapter 7](#)).

The table summarises the main interpretations of the gospels concerning the last supper and the date of the crucifixion.

Main interpretations of the gospel accounts of the last supper and the date of the crucifixion

Interpretation		Implied date of crucifixion
1	Synoptics correct John wrong	Nisan 15
2	Synoptics correct John can be interpreted to agree	Nisan 15
3	John correct Synoptics correct if last supper was a Passover-like meal	Nisan 14
4	John correct Synoptics correct if a different calendar was used	Nisan 14

A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

When I first thought about the problem of the last supper, I was unhappy with all of the solutions proposed above. Interpretation 1 requires John to have grossly distorted historical facts for the sake of theological symbolism. As we have seen, John states that the Passover was not only after the last supper, it was also after the trials of Jesus and after his crucifixion. This positioning of the Passover is like a thread running through the fabric of John's account. If this thread is removed then the fabric is in danger of falling apart. John clearly had theological motives in writing his gospel; in particular he wrote it so that people would believe that Jesus is the Son of God (John 20:31). However, is it likely he would have distorted so much the order of events surrounding the crucifixion for the sake of these motives? In addition, portraying Jesus as a Passover lamb is not a major theme of John's gospel.¹⁵

The problem with interpretation 2 is that it is not the natural interpretation of John's gospel. For example, when John writes that the evening meal (the last supper) was just before the Passover Feast (John 13:1), this looks to me like a *deliberate* time statement by John. He follows this statement by referring to the evening meal being served (John 13:2) and *then* to the foot washing (John 13:3–12). It therefore seems that John is saying that *both* the meal and the foot washing occurred before the Passover Feast. As John Meier writes: 'John pointedly places the meal just before Passover (John 13:1).'¹⁶ When John says the Jews at the trial of Jesus by Pilate wanted to be able to eat the Passover (John 18:28) the Greek phrase John uses for 'to eat the Passover', *phagein to pascha*, is identical to the one used by the synoptics to describe what was to happen at the last supper (Matthew 26:17, Mark 14:12, Luke 22:8, 15). In addition, John is explicit that at the end of the trial by Pilate: 'It was the day of preparation of Passover' (John 19:14). In both cases it would therefore seem that the main Passover meal held at the start of Passover week was intended and not some lesser meal later in the week.

The problem with interpretation 3 is that Matthew, Mark and Luke describe the last supper as a *real* Passover meal, not a Passover-like meal or a quasi-Passover meal. The synoptics record *Jesus himself* calling this meal the Passover. Surely they would not have done this unless they were convinced that the last supper really was a Passover meal. The objection that they do not mention a Passover lamb is not as strong as it might seem. Everyone knew there was a lamb at the Passover meal, hence it was not necessary to mention it: it could be assumed.

The difficulty with interpretation 4 is that only one 'different calendar' theory has been proposed in detail and has received any support from biblical scholars: that of Annie Jaubert. However, she assumes that the Passover of the Qumran community was *before* that in the official Jewish calendar, whereas I will show it to have been *after* the official Passover (see [Chapter 7](#)). This totally rules out Jaubert's theory. Thus there are no 'different calendar' theories that are convincing.

Hence the main interpretations of the last supper so far proposed all have serious drawbacks, as recognised by many biblical scholars.

For example, R. T. France writes: 'But in what sense was this [the last supper] a Passover meal? The debate occasioned by the differing statements of John and the Synoptics has been extremely complex, and the issue remains unresolved.'¹⁷ This book will propose a new solution to this problem.

THE LAST SUPPER AND THE DATE OF THE CRUCIFIXION

As we have seen, biblical scholars are totally divided on which interpretation of the last supper they support. These interpretations give rise to two options for the date of the crucifixion, Nisan 14 or 15, and scholars do not know with any certainty which is right. We also have a wide range of years to choose from, AD 26–36, as we deduced in [Chapter 2](#). Can we narrow down the options? If we can reduce the options on possible dates for the crucifixion we may also be able to eliminate one or more proposed interpretations of the last supper.

To help us think about this problem, let me use a more modern-day analogy. Let us suppose that police find a skeleton of a man murdered in the last century. They call in forensic scientists who indicate the man was killed sometime in the period 1926–36. Various papers are found saying the man died on a Friday. Then some conflicting evidence emerges, some of which suggests that he died on April 14, but other evidence says April 15. How can we narrow down the possible dates for his death?

The simplest way, which I have just done, is to go to a computer search engine like *Google* and type in 'calendar'. The first website that appeared gave the calendar for any year since 1900. By typing in '1926', I found that April 14 in 1926 was on a Wednesday and April 15 was a Thursday, so if the man died on Friday, 1926 could not have been the year of the murder. In fact there are only three possibilities: April 14 fell on a Friday in 1933 and April 15 fell on a Friday in 1927 and 1932. The past calendars show that these are the only dates that are possible for the murder. If our imaginary police detectives were to persevere they might find other evidence that enables them to say that, for example, 1927 was too early and 1933 too late for the man's death, leaving

Friday, April 15, 1932 as the only possible date for the murder. This is the approach I will use in the [next chapter](#) to narrow down the possible dates of the crucifixion. First, we take the three key clues we have discovered in this chapter and the previous one, to find the possible dates for the crucifixion. These are that Jesus died in the period AD 26–36, it was on a Friday and it was either Nisan 14 or 15. Putting these clues together enables us to ask the following question:

In which of the years AD 26–36 did Nisan 14 or 15 fall on a Friday?

To answer this question we need to find Jewish calendars for the years AD 26–36. Now comes the problem. Unfortunately there are no records of the Jewish calendar in Jerusalem for these years. It therefore seems impossible to make further progress on finding the date when Jesus died.

As I first thought about this problem, way back in 1981, I wondered if astronomy could help. Scientists use the equations of motion of the moon and the earth to calculate the dates of ancient eclipses. Can we similarly use astronomy to reconstruct the Jewish calendar in the first century AD, since we know that the first day in each month was determined by observing the first appearance of the new moon? Can we calculate when these new moons would have been seen?

This is what we are going to do in the [next chapter](#). We will in fact be following in the footsteps of one of the greatest scientists of all time, Sir Isaac Newton, who used astronomy to try to find the date of the crucifixion. However, we will use more accurate equations and methods than were available to him. We will also answer the questions of many biblical scholars who doubt that astronomy can be used with confidence in this way. Their doubts are justified for previous calendar reconstructions, but not for the new reconstructions given in the [next chapter](#).

SUMMARY

Before we do this, let me summarise what we have found in this chapter and the last. First, from the known dates when Tiberius was

the Roman emperor, Caiaphas was the high priest and Pilate was the governor of Judea we can say, beyond reasonable doubt, that the crucifixion was some time in the period AD 26–36. Second, all the biblical evidence either explicitly states, or is consistent with, Friday as the day of Jesus' death. Finally, John appears to disagree with the synoptics on whether or not the last supper was a Passover meal. Four possible interpretations of the last supper have been given which yield that Jesus died on either Nisan 14 or 15 (Nisan was the first month of the Jewish year, corresponding to March/April in our calendar). In order to determine the date of the crucifixion, and also throw light on the nature of the last supper, we therefore have to find in which year Nisan 14 or 15 fell on a Friday in the period AD 26–36.

The date of the crucifixion

Day of week	Friday
Jewish day	Nisan 14 or 15
Period of time	AD 26–36
