

The Last Supper and the Passover

Peter J Blackburn

An Essay presented as part of the requirements for New Testament A
for the Degree of Bachelor of Divinity within the University of Queensland

© Peter J Blackburn 1963, 2000

Full title: Compare the Marcan and Johannine accounts of the Last Supper, examining particularly the question whether this Supper was a Passover meal.

Synopsis:

1. Introduction

2. The Problem Refined

Points of difference in the Marcan and Johannine Passion narratives points at which the internal consistency of both have been challenged; question of which is more original.

3. The Last Supper as Passover

Points urged in favour by Jeremias and his answers to ten charges of inconsistency in the Synoptic account – critically examined.

4. The Question of a Double Dating

D. Chwolson etc. – killing put forward by 24 hrs. Lichtenstein – difference over commencement of Nisan. J. Pickl – number of participants necessitating different times of killing and eating. A. Jaubert – the existence of two calendars, lunar and solar, and the possibility of our Lord following the latter in this case.

5. The Last Supper as *Kiddush* for Passover or Sabbath

The nature and time of the *Kiddush*.

6. The Last Supper as *Haburah*

The nature and circumstances of the *Haburah*.

7. The Theology of the Death of Christ and of the Lord's Supper

Mark 10.45 and the Supper sayings. John – ch.6, the words of John the Baptist in 1.29 and the chronology of the crucifixion. Paul – 1 Cor. 5.7 and 11.23ff.

8. Conclusion

1. Introduction

“Was the Last Supper a Passover meal?” This question has occurred often in works on the Supper and on the Passion. The problem is no new one. In fact it has attracted a large volume of literature. Unfortunately, this has made it impossible merely to consider the Biblical texts themselves, and yet they have been so overlaid with different theories that it is equally unhealthy to consider these theories without meticulously examining the texts.

This essay attempts to steer a middle course between these extremes, and so by dint of limited space may deal too superficially with both. The method has been to see evidences, alternatives and possibilities, and conclusions are frequently a balance of judgments and assessment of preferences. The method is therefore critical, and must needs suffer from that subtle (and not so subtle) subjectivity which characterises all our attempts at objectivity. At least, if the relevant questions are asked, this method serves to elucidate the nature of the problem and to indicate in which directions the answers may perhaps be found.

2. The Problem Defined

A close examination of the Marcan and Johannine Passion narratives reveals apparent discrepancies, not simply in the overall chronology, but in the nature of the Last Supper. Both narratives agree in the day of the week on which the crucifixion took place – in each case the following day is described as the sabbath (Mk 15.42; Jn 19.31). In each case the day of crucifixion is said to be the “day of preparation”, though in Mark it is particularly the sabbath that is in mind, while in John it is a special sabbath, being also this year the Passover (19.14,31).

Now Mark (with the other Synoptists) indicates that the Last Supper was a Passover meal – in 14.12ff his disciples ask about preparations for the Passover, and two of them are sent to prepare it; while the account in 14.17ff makes no mention of the Paschal lamb, there are plain allusions to the Passover celebration, as will be seen later; 15.6 notes that it was Pilate’s custom to release a prisoner at the feast, which Vincent Taylor takes to be the Passover¹ – which agrees with the Passover meal being held the night before – though one questions whether this needs to refer specifically to the day of the Passover itself.

John implies that the last meal and the crucifixion took place before the Passover – from 13.1ff it is plain that the supper was “before the feast of the Passover”; 18.28 indicates that the trial took place the day before the Passover; 18.39 gives the governor’s custom of releasing a prisoner on the Passover – this confirms the impression above that this need not have been on the actual feast day; 19.14, as noted, describes the day of the trial as “the day of Preparation for the Passover”.

Thus, C.K. Barrett concludes, “John differs from the synoptic gospels in the date which he gives for the crucifixion. According to Mark... the last supper was a Passover meal; that is, it was eaten in the early hours of Nisan 15; the arrest and trial took place in the same night and in the course of the next (solar) day Jesus was crucified... According to John... the crucifixion happened on Nisan 14, the day before the Passover; the last supper must have been eaten the preceding evening. Thus the events are set a day earlier than in Mark, and the last supper is no longer the Paschal meal; Jesus died at the time when the Passover sacrifices were being killed in the Temple. Here again is a real contradiction; it is impossible to reconcile the dates...; one must be preferred to the other.”²

Although this defines the core of the problem, there are other issues that have emerged as the discussion on this subject has proceeded. One such issue concerns the internal consistency of the accounts of the different evangelists.

Of alleged inconsistencies in the Synoptic accounts, Jeremias collects ten.³ It is maintained that the following events could not have taken place as suggested by Mk 14.17-15.47 on the first feast-day of the Passover, which would have the character of a holy day and a Sabbath: “(1) Jesus’ retreat to Gethsemane on the night of the Passover; (2) the carrying of arms by the Temple guards and some of the disciples on that night; (3) the meeting of the Sanhedrin and the trial and condemnation of Jesus during the night of the Passover; (4) the tearing of the robe at the session of the court; (5) the participation of the Jews in the session of a Roman court on the morning of the feast-day; (6) the coming of Simon of Cyrene ἀπὸ ἄγροῦ on the morning of Nisan the 15th; (7) the execution of Jesus on the high feast-day; (8) the purchase of the shroud for the body in the evening of the feast-day; (9) the taking down of the body of Jesus, his burial, and the rolling of the stone; (10) the preparation of spices and ointments.”

These arguments vary in cogency and any detailed consideration of Jeremias’ answers must be reserved till later. It may be noted here, however, that (1) ignores the fact that while the Paschal lamb had to be eaten within the walls of Jerusalem the night of the Passover could be spent in the district of greater Jerusalem, an expedient necessitated by the large number of pilgrims in Jerusalem at that time; that (6) is based on the assumption that he had been working in the fields; that (5) and (7) refer to measures which could not have been taken by the Jewish authorities but only by the Roman governor.

Jeremias also cites other objections which are levelled against the consistency of the Synoptic account. It is suggested that the last supper could not have been a Passover meal since ἄρτος is used for the bread instead of ἄζυμα, and since there is no explicit reference to the Paschal lamb and the bitter herbs.⁴ Further, it is claimed that the determination of the chief priests and scribes not to arrest Jesus during the feast (Mk 14.2) is contradicted by the

¹ *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (Macmillan, London, 1952), p. 580.

² *The Gospel according to St. John* (S.P.C.K., London, 1960), p. 39.

³ (tr. A. Ehrhardt), *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1955), p. 49.

⁴ *ibid.* pp. 37ff, 42.

Synoptic chronology in which they do exactly this whatever is thought of his suggested rendering of $\mu\eta\grave{\iota}\ \epsilon\nu\ \tau\eta\ \epsilon\omicron\omicron\rho\tau\eta$,⁵ Jeremias is surely right in pointing to the difference Judas' approach may have made to the Sanhedrin's decision.⁶

Against the Johannine chronology it is urged that some of John's remarks concerning the Last Supper presuppose a Passover setting.⁷ Thus, John sets the meal in Jerusalem, although the city was overcrowded by pilgrims who had come to celebrate the feast (note 11.55; 12.12,18). The supper lasted into the night (see 13.30) – this was not usual for Jewish meals. Furthermore, it is difficult to see why some of the disciples should have interpreted our Lord's words to Judas as directing him to give alms to the poor at night (13.29b) unless this was his usual practice – whereas the custom was usual on the night of the Passover. Jeremias⁸ cites Wellhausen, "13.21-30. Jesus and the disciples are here still at table and in fact at the passover meal, i.e., the Holy Supper of the Synoptists; in contradiction to 13.1; 18.28; 19.14 – it is idle to shut one's eyes to this contradiction."

Another issue which has come under debate has been this: assuming the flat contradiction of the two forms of the narrative, which is more likely to be primitive and which to have been moulded by the later church? To answer this here would be to beg the conclusion. Barrett, himself favouring the Synoptic dating, poses succinctly the two sides of the discussion. "The synoptic error is accounted for as due to the belief that, since the Eucharist was interpreted as the Christian Passover, the last supper must have been a Passover meal."⁹ On his own conclusion that Mark is right, he states that "it is not difficult to see why John gives his alternative date. As early as Paul (1 Cor. 5.7) Jesus was thought of as the true Paschal sacrifice. John repeats and emphasises this theme (1.29; 19.36).¹⁰ On his dating Jesus died on the cross at the moment when the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the temple. This may not be good history; but it does seem to be Johannine theology."¹¹ This, then, forms another aspect of the problem as consistent solutions are worked out. It must be borne in mind, however, that this is based on a conclusion of the utter incompatibility of the sources. With a different conclusion, this discussion does not arise.

⁵ V. Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 667.

⁶ *op. cit.* p. 46ff.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 55ff.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 56.

⁹ *op. cit.*, p. 39.

¹⁰ But cf. V. Taylor. *op. cit.*, p.666.

¹¹ *op. cit.*, p.41.

3. The Last Supper as Passover

As has been already indicated, one reading of the Synoptic evidence seems to assert that the Last Supper was a regular Passover meal, celebrated in the night of (“before” by our manner of reckoning) Nisan 15th. Difficulties of comparison must be noted here, as the Johannine material on the supper is very scant indeed. J.H. Bernard has shown that although the various narratives cannot be precisely harmonised “there can be no doubt that Jn 13 is intended to describe the same supper as that of Mk 14, Mt. 26, Lk. 22.”¹² This conclusion is not doubted, but Bernard’s analysis serves to underline the different focal points of the narratives – in both, the presence of the betrayer is important; beyond this, however, the Synoptic accounts emphasise the institution of the Lord’s Supper, whereas John recounts the washing of the disciples’ feet (Bernard is surely right in seeing Lk. 22.26,27 as a parallel). According as the historicity of one or the other is impugned, the essential significance of the meal is considerably altered.

The evidence for regarding the Last Supper as a Passover meal has been marshalled by Jeremias. As noted already, the Last Supper took place in Jerusalem (Mk 14.13; Jn. 38.1).¹³ This is notable for two reasons: no matter what date be given for the meal, Jerusalem was crowded with visitors for the feast; on the Synoptic account, Jesus and his disciples were lodging in Bethany (Mk 11.11). This would mean a meal specially arranged and prepared. John does not give this impression, though he does not exclude it and the circumstance of the meal being in Jerusalem may indicate that it had Paschal significance. At least it fulfilled the condition for a Passover meal. It has also been noted that the meal lasted into the night. “The normal time for the evening meal was late afternoon.”¹⁴ Again, other scholars are right in pointing to the fact that a guest meal would often last into the night, though this does not lessen Jeremias’ thesis that these facts are consistent with the Last Supper being a Passover meal. It only diminishes the necessity of that conclusion. K.G. Kuhn seems to overstate his case in claiming that this night-aspect is no essential part of the cult formula itself, that Jeremias deduces it from Paul’s phrase in 1 Cor. 11.23, and that the latter uses it editorially to fit it into his own chronology of the Passion.¹⁵ It seems saner judgment to regard this as of the essence of the narrative, especially since it is not emphasised by the Synoptists who alone of the sources indicate the Last Supper to be a Passover meal. A third aspect has already been noted – the disciples’ interpretation of our Lord’s words to Judas as an instruction to give alms to the poor.¹⁶ Jeremias’ argument here is strengthened by the fact that this occurs in the Johannine account.

Jeremias refers to the uniqueness of the limited number at the table fellowship.¹⁷ However, while this may be confirmatory of the Paschal character of the meal, it may equally be explained in terms of our Lord’s desire to be alone with the twelve in view of his impending death. The references to reclining suggest a Passover meal.¹⁸ The normal posture for a meal was sitting – reclining was reserved for feasts and other meals of special significance. C.E.B. Cranfield has noted that “by this time it was obligatory for even the poorest to recline at the Passover meal.”¹⁹ This evidence then is valid on the assumption that there would be no other meal of special significance at that season than the Passover itself. Jeremias himself considers that the table posture would be satisfactorily accounted for “if it could be proved that the Last Supper was a ‘Kiddush-meal’.”²⁰ But the possibility of the supper being some other meal of special significance must receive further consideration later. Suffice it here to note that it is fairly strong, though not conclusive, evidence.

Whereas ordinary meals began with the breaking of bread, Mk 14.18,22 suggest that this meal did not begin thus, but rather with a “dish” (v.20). This seems to have been an exclusive feature of the Passover, where the eating of bitter herbs preceded the breaking of the bread, though Vincent Taylor can comment, “Commentators identify the contents of the bowl with the *Haroseth*, the sauce compounded of dates, raisins, and vinegar used at the Passover Meal, but this

¹² *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John* (T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1928), Vol. II, p.457.

¹³ Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 14ff.

¹⁴ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (CUP., Cambridge. 1959), p. 420.

¹⁵ “The Lord’s Supper and the Communal Meal at Qumran” in K. Stendahl (ed.) *The Scrolls and the New Testament* (SCM, London, 1958), p. 82.

¹⁶ Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 18ff.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 20ff.

¹⁹ *op. cit.*, p. 431.

²⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 21ff.

opinion depends on the view taken of the character of the meal.²¹ Taylor, does not seem to take the unique position in the meal into account. Jeremias appears to show greater reason here in writing that in the event of ἐσθιόντων αὐτῶν being no more than an editorial transition to the institution of the Eucharist “even the editor and in particular Mark, who hailed from Jerusalem – must have been conscious of the fact that with the words ἐσθιόντων αὐτῶν he was describing a sequence which differed completely from that of everyday.”²²

It is significant that wine is drunk at the meal, contrary to the usual custom.²³ This gives the meal a special significance, and with the fact that it was apparently red wine, is coherent with the theory that the meal was the Passover. K.G. Kuhn considers that the use of wine may indicate “a communal meal of the Essene community” – however, it has already been noted that this circumstance need not refer exclusively to a Passover setting. His criticisms of Jeremias’ deductions concerning the colour of the wine seem valid, “The use of red wine at the Passover meal is... only the teaching of a single rabbi from the fourth century A.D., preserved in the Jerusalem Talmud; it is not a prevailing *halaka*. Furthermore the wine in Palestine was usually red.”²⁴

The Last Supper ended with the singing of a hymn (Mk 14.26).²⁵ This was probably the second part of the *Hallel*, as even Taylor seems to imply by describing this view as “commonly held” and yet offering no alternative.²⁶ The night spent at the Mount of Olives (Mk 14.26) in a garden east of the brook Kidron (Jn 18.1) was within the district of greater Jerusalem and therefore was another circumstance congruous with a Passover meal,²⁷ though by no means proving it. The “one quite decisive fact” which forms the climax of Jeremias’ argument is the interpreting of the elements of the meal.²⁸ Yet this seems also to be the climax of Kuhn’s objections to Jeremias’ argument, for it was essentially the particular elements of the Passover meal which were thus interpreted – *viz.* the lamb, the bitter herbs, and the unleavened bread.²⁹ Jeremias has, indeed, made out a good case for the use of ἄρτος for unleavened bread,³⁰ but the explanatory words, in a Passover setting, would have to be “a comment on the unleavened character of the bread, not on the bread as such.”³¹ The principle may indicate the Passover season, but its implementation even suggests that it may not have been a Passover meal.

Jeremias’ list of ten objections against the consistence of the Synoptic account has already been cited and several of his answers have already been considered. Objections (2), (4), (9) and (10) are claimed to rest on ignorance of the *Halakha* and are answered by reference to Rabbinical decisions.³² Vincent Taylor rightly raises a caution, “It is, of course, a moot point how far these later decisions were valid in the time of Christ.”³³ However, these later decisions, together with the lack of contemporary evidence, at least serve to keep the issue open. More serious are the objections (3) and (8). Jeremias himself concedes that the rule was that there be no trials on feast-days,³⁴ though he is quite right in suggesting that the difficulty exists with either the Synoptic or the Johannine dating. Thus his argument has considerable weight, even if one considers, as Taylor does, that his reference to later Rabbinical decisions to show that a false prophet was usually tried in Jerusalem is irrelevant and an unfortunate repetition of the same type of reasoning.³⁵ The reference to Joseph’s buying the shroud in the evening (Mk 15.46) has caused more considerable strife. Vincent Taylor has noted the different scholars who argue from this purchase that the Passover day has not yet begun, and himself notes that “It is hard to agree that ἀγοράσας is not a confirmation of the Johannine chronology.”³⁶ Jeremias again appeals to

²¹ *op. cit.*, p.541.

²² *op. cit.*, pp. 26, 27.

²³ *ibid.*, p.27ff.

²⁴ *op. cit.*, pp. 82, 83.

²⁵ Jeremias, *op. cit.*, pp.30-1.

²⁶ *op. cit.*, p.548.

²⁷ Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p.31. Note B.H. Branscomb (against the Passover interpretation), “The journey to Gethsemane would not have exceeded the Sabbath day’s journey permitted on a feast-day” - *The Gospel of Mark* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1937), p. 251.

²⁸ *op. cit.*, p. 31ff.

²⁹ *op. cit.*, p. 83. Cf Branscomb, *op. cit.*, p. 252; also A. Edersheim, *The Temple* (James Clarke, London, repr. 1959), p. 237.

³⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 37ff.

³¹ Kuhn, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

³² *op. cit.*, p. 50.

³³ *op. cit.*, p. 666.

³⁴ *op. cit.*, p. 52.

³⁵ *op. cit.*, p.667.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 601.

later Rabbinic pronouncements which softened the law in view of the necessities of life.³⁷ The law required that a man hung on a tree had to be buried on the same day (Dt. 21.23). If, therefore, it can be shown that a man could be executed on a feast-day, then it follows that provision must have been made so that the law concerning his burial could also be fulfilled. These two conditions from later times stand or fall together.

It has thus been seen that there is evidence of varying weight for regarding the Last Supper as a regular Passover meal. Some of the evidence is only probable and congruous, rather than providing any direct proof. Some of that directly related to the meal itself definitely marks the meal out as one of special significance, and while one is not convinced that Jeremias has succeeded in establishing his case the meal itself still demands explanation – it appears to be something other than an ordinary evening meal.

³⁷ *op. cit.*, pp. 51-2.

4. The Question of a Double Dating

Some scholars have sought to account for the two apparent chronologies by suggesting that in the year of our Lord's death there were two dates at which the Passover was celebrated, the one at the time of the Last Supper, the other on the day following the crucifixion. This has been put forward in a number of different forms.

In 1908, D. Chwolson (since followed by others) proposed that, since in the time of Jesus the Paschal lambs were still slaughtered in the twilight of the evening commencing Nisan 15th, and since Nisan 15th fell on a Sabbath in the year of Jesus' death, the killing of the Paschal lambs was brought forward to the evening commencing Nisan 14th. The Pharisaic section of the people and Jesus with them would have eaten the meal immediately after the killing, whereas the Sadducees waited till the usual day.³⁸

Jeremias rejects this solution for three reasons: (a) while it is true that up to the second century B.C. the killing of the Passover took place in the evening twilight, the killing would, in the event of a coincidence of the Passover and the Sabbath, be brought forward by only four to six hours; (b) in the time of Jesus the killing took place in the afternoon of Nisan 14th; (c) the Sadducees would not have waited twenty-four hours before eating the lamb since Ex.12.10 forbids anything to be left over to the next morning.³⁹

Unfortunately, insufficient detail of Chwolson's theory and inability to check all Jeremias' points makes it difficult to assess the situation. Point (b) seems fairly well substantiated.⁴⁰ Having established (b) even as only a later practice, (a) need not depend merely on his personal observation but also on the change made in later practice. With regard to (c), one would think it more pertinent to cite Ex.12.8 ("They shall eat the flesh that night..."), for v.10 is related to the feast rather than to the killing. In any case, this view seems untenable.

Jechiel Lichtenstein, in 1913, was of the opinion that in the year of Jesus' death the Sadducees and the Pharisees had a difference concerning the sighting of the new light which would mark the commencement of the month Nisan. It is said that the Pharisees put Nisan 1st one day earlier than the Sadducees, and consequently the two parties agreed to compromise by having two killings that year.⁴¹ However, it must be stated at the outset that this rests on sheer speculation, even though Billerbeck in particular has advanced it, as Jeremias concedes, "with so much circumspection and forethought that its possibility cannot be denied." Yet as a possibility it must remain an **unproved** and perhaps **unprovable** one.

In 1935, J. Pickl suggested a less complicated solution: that the great number of participants in the Passover made it impossible for them all to kill and eat their lambs at the prescribed times, and that the custom grew up for the Galileans to celebrate the feast a day earlier than the people of Judaea.⁴² However, the evidence for this seems to be very slender.

Of more recent significance have been the efforts of Mlle A. Jaubert to show that Jesus could have followed the calendar of the Qumran community in his celebration of the Passover (*La Date de la Cène*, 1957). It has been fairly well established that the Qumran sect did not use the official lunar calendar, but the solar calendar of the book of Jubilees. By this calendar the Passover would be celebrated on the same day of the week each year, *viz.*, the fourth.⁴³

Some have argued that Jesus would be unlikely to adopt such a calendar. This, indeed, would be true if such a calendar were confined to the closed setting of Qumran. However, Mlle Jaubert adduces reasons for believing that there were in the time of Jesus arguments concerning the calendar. The "sons of Bethyra", important Jerusalem authorities, are cited as not having known whether or not the Paschal sacrifice took precedence over the Sabbath. This is said to indicate that "either the Jerusalem authorities had a short memory or the immolation of the Paschal lamb on the Sabbath would hardly have been traditional in the Temple calendar."⁴⁴ In particular there is evidence that with the feast of Pentecost the Pharisees fought against the principle of a fixed day of the week.⁴⁵ But even further Mlle Jaubert argues

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 7ff.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁰ W. Corswant (tr. A. Heathcote), *A Dictionary of Life in Bible Times* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1960), p.206. Edersheim times the killing at 1.30 p.m. (*op. cit.*, p. 222ff).

⁴¹ Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁴² *ibid.*, pp. 9, 10.

⁴³ "Jésus et le Calendrier de Qumrân", *New Testament Studies*, 7, p. 2 (citations of Jaubert will be from this article).

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 6.

that this calendar was more ancient, had liturgical significance, appears to be in direct dependence on the calendar used in the Priestly documents.⁴⁶ Especially in view of the treatment he received at the hands of official Judaism, Mlle Jaubert considers, “It can even be very seriously held that a Paschal ritual independent of the Temple would be better suited to the case of Jesus.”⁴⁷ Further, this rite did in fact exist with the Essene communities and with any other groups attached to the old priestly calendar.

Mlle Jaubert herself sees as the essential difficulty the question whether a Paschal rite separated from the Temple would include the eating of the Paschal lamb. There appear to be two possibilities. One stems from the fact that the Passover was celebrated without a lamb by Jews of Palestine and of the Dispersion who were prevented from going up to Jerusalem.⁴⁸ It is noteworthy that E. Stauffer has also argued for this lambless Passover, not only outside Jerusalem, but in the capital itself since “in Palestinian Judaism in the time of Jesus it is usual for the calendar of feasts to be calculated differently in different groups and regions – particularly in the calculation of the Passover.”⁴⁹

It must be seriously questioned whether a rite which which was practised outside Jerusalem would be likely to be transferred to Jerusalem. Certainly, if this is in fact what our Lord did, it was more likely on account of official suspicion of him as a heretic,⁵⁰ than from his own attitude towards the Temple ordinances.⁵¹ The other possibility is suggested by reference to Philo – all men are said to act as priests on this day (see *De spec. leg.* II. 145-6; *Dec.*, 159). If, therefore, the sanctity of the place chosen by God (Dt. 16.6) extends to the whole city, then a full Paschal rite could be celebrated apart from the Temple.⁵²

The real question is whether the relation of Jesus to official Judaism on the one hand and to non-conformist groups within Judaism on the other is as clear as Jaubert makes out.⁵³ The evidence on this point is frequently overstated and considered with only one conclusion in view.

In view of Mlle Jaubert’s discussion, it must be affirmed that the undoubted existence of a calendar differing from the official one and of a Paschal rite detached from the Temple and celebrated without a regular Paschal lamb is of importance in assessing the significance of the Last Supper. However, care must be taken to note what is not proved – that Jesus at any other point of his ministry followed any other calendar than the official one in his observance of feasts or that he was in fact deliberately doing so in this instance. This question is more relevant than a weighing of the chances of the Passover falling in the same week in both calendars – apparently only once every thirty years.⁵⁴

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p.23.

⁴⁹ (tr. D.M. Barton), *Jesus and His Story* (SCM, London, 1960), p. 95. Cf. B. Gärtner, *John 6 and the Jewish Passover* (Gleerup, Lund, 1959), pp.44, 46ff.

⁵⁰ Stauffer, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

⁵¹ A. Jaubert, *op. cit.* p. 22.

⁵² *ibid.* p. 33ff.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵⁴ So A.J.B. Higgins, *The Historicity of the Fourth Gospel*, (Lutterworth, London, 1960), p. 61.

5. The Last Supper as *Kiddush* for Passover or Sabbath

A number of scholars have suggested that the Last Supper is to be identified with the *Kiddush* or ritual sanctification of either the Passover or the Sabbath. This view is now generally rejected since it is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the *Kiddush*.

Essentially the *Kiddush* was the Blessing said at the beginning of the Sabbath or feast-day. It marked off the sacred from the profane time, as the Blessing of separation, the *Habhdala*, did at the close. Thus Jeremias has noted, “a separation of the *Kiddush* or the *Habhdala* from the sacred time is quite unthinkable and without example.”⁵⁵ As F.C. Burkitt pointed out, “*Kiddush* immediately precedes the actual celebration of the day, e.g. *kiddush* for Sabbath is done on what we call Friday evening, not twenty-four hours earlier.”⁵⁶

According to Jeremias, the *Kiddush* was not a meal, though it would often be added to the grace after the meal before the Sabbath and would take place at the beginning of the Passover meal (since this began after the setting of the sun).⁵⁷ Thus, he states, “‘*Kiddush* meals’... never existed if anything more is meant by them than meals at which the normal grace was combined with a special blessing on account of the Sabbath or a feast-day starting during the meal or as the meal began.”⁵⁸

However, Vincent Taylor, alike rejecting the possibility of identifying the Supper with a *Kiddush*, maintains that “these suggestions are valuable in showing that, in addition to the Passover Meal, there existed in contemporary Judaism quasi-religious meals which, in certain respects, are not unlike the Last Supper.”⁵⁹ Taylor is inexact here, since every Jewish meal could be called “quasi-religious”, and if these resembled the Last Supper, so did any ordinary meal.

There does not seem to be anything in the *Kiddush* which specifically characterised the Last Supper. This at least the present evidence seems to imply. The chief point of resemblance was seen in the fact that now at the Sabbath-*Kiddush* the blessing of the wine is followed by the breaking of bread at the beginning of the meal.⁶⁰ But this appears to have been a later development.

⁵⁵ *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁵⁶ Cited V. Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 665.

⁵⁷ *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 23.

⁵⁹ *Jesus and His Sacrifice* (Macmillan, London, 1951), p. 116.

⁶⁰ Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

6. The Last Supper as *Haburah*

A number of scholars have seen in the Last Supper some form of *Haburah*, a meal among a group of associates endowed with religious benediction.

However, Jeremiah rightly points out that “religious benediction” was given to every meal by the saying of grace, no matter what form the meal took.⁶¹ Further evidence is lacking concerning the existence of this custom. The mention of *Haburoth* in connection with ritual meals occurs only when they are “fellowships to perform some special duty”, as with marriage, circumcision, burial, and other legal observances.⁶² Jeremias, indeed, does not think such a meal could be held without some special circumstance. It may be that his own impending death and burial would supply the necessary circumstance. Further, if the Supper was not a *Haburah* in the strict sense, it may have been an ordinary meal endowed with special significance on account of his anticipated death.

Gärtner believes that this possibility must be kept open. Considering the observations of Théo Preiss, he writes, “Jesus had wanted to eat the Passover with his disciples, but this was rendered impossible. Instead, in the Last Supper, Jesus brings together the Paschal lamb motive, the eschatological expectations of the Passover and the expected Messianic feast in the Kingdom of God.”⁶³ While not himself embracing all these ideas, Gärtner considers that they deserve to be given serious consideration, and with this we must agree.

⁶¹ *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 26; V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark*, p. 665.

⁶³ *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45.

7. The Theology of the Death of Christ and of the Lord's Supper

Before attempting a synthesis of the different facets so far considered, there are two further problems that demand attention – how did the chronology of the Passion affect the Church's understanding of the significance of the death of Christ? and how did the Church understand the sacrament which has stemmed from the Last Supper?

At the outset, it needs to be understood that it is difficult to proceed with a methodology which is reasonably free from presuppositions. It is frequently easy to find evidence, difficult to arrive at conclusions. Thus, for example, some would rather put the question above, "how did the Church's understanding of the death of Christ affect the presentation of the chronology of the Passion?" Answers depend so often on the questions asked, and these in turn on the characteristics one is looking for in the text.

In Mark's gospel, 10.45 (= Mt. 20.28) is key to the understanding of the death of Christ – "For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his a life a ransom for many." Accepting the saying as genuine,⁶⁴ one finds the key to its background in Is. 53 – the Servant who voluntarily and vicariously gives up his life. There is no need to see here a detailed ransom theology, but to note that the *λύτρον* was the purchase-price of deliverance.

The other point of interpretation of the death of Christ in Mark's gospel is the Last Supper itself. Noteworthy is the fact that in relating his death to the Paschal meal it is to the bread and wine and not to the lamb itself, to which in fact no reference is made. In this gospel, the interpretation of the bread is in its simplest form, "this is my body" (14.22). The bread was broken, given and received. Thus Taylor can write of the saying, "It suggests that Jesus looked upon his suffering and death as a sacrificial offering of himself for men."⁶⁵ It is hardly possible to state what form of sacrifice is implied. The life broken and given is a theme common to most sacrifices. Seen in a setting of a Paschal meal, the unleavened bread could be variously interpreted.⁶⁶ In Dt. 16.3 it is described as "the bread of affliction", in memory of their hurried flight from the land of Egypt. But this by itself does not seem to provide a key to the understanding of the saying of Jesus.

The interpretation of the cup – "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many" (v. 24) – refers directly to the covenant sacrifice (Ex. 24.8; cf. Zech. 9.11). Taylor has noted, "The Targum on this passage connected the blood of the covenant with that of the Passover lamb at the time of the departure from Egypt."⁶⁷ There is no guarantee that this was in our Lord's mind at that time, without prejudging the issue. Certainly, if this is a Passover setting, then this may have been in mind and, if so, then he saw himself dying as the true Paschal Lamb.

The more important connection here is with the saying of 10.45. In both the life is portrayed as being given "for many" (there *ἀντὶ πολλῶν*, here *ὑπὲρ πολλῶν*). In the former, the life given is seen in relation to deliverance (especially from slavery), in the latter, to a covenant. To speak in terms of possibility rather than of certainty, this relationship **may** indicate quite definite Paschal ideas.

Jeremias, from a definite acceptance of the meal as a Passover, considers that Christ must first, although this is not recorded, have referred the Paschal lamb to himself, and in both of the recorded sayings, therefore, he speaks of himself as the Paschal Lamb.⁶⁸ But this kind of conclusion goes well beyond the facts as recorded. In the narrative of the death and resurrection itself there is little interpretation which might be relevant to the present quest.

In John's gospel, ch. 6 is important for the interpretation of our Lord's death.⁶⁹ Here there is reference to the eating of his flesh and the drinking of his blood, and the relation of this to the manna in the wilderness. The emphasis throughout is on the giving of life. It is noteworthy that this is described as taking place at the Passover season (6.4). It is also noteworthy that the references to flesh and blood are contained in only one symbol – the bread.

Since this Passover was celebrated in Galilee, it would probably have been, as noted above, without a Paschal lamb. It may well have been that the significance of the lamb tended to be assumed by the other important elements of the feast. Be that as it may, the manna draws attention to the deliverance involved in the background of the Passover. While related in thought to the words of institution, the fact that flesh and blood are combined under bread makes it difficult to assert that these words give the Johannine version of the institution of the Lord's Supper.

⁶⁴ V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark*, pp. 445-6.

⁶⁵ *Jesus and His Sacrifice*, p. 125.

⁶⁶ Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p.32ff.

⁶⁷ *The Gospel according to St. Mark*, p. 545.

⁶⁸ *op. cit.*, p.144ff.

⁶⁹ See B. Gärtner, *op. cit.*

The words of John the Baptist in Jn 1.29 (cf. v. 36) are both important and difficult – “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” The difficulty is in determining to which lamb he refers. Taylor thinks the most satisfactory identification is with Is. 53.7,12 where the servant of Yahweh is described as one who is like “a lamb that is led to the slaughter” and “who bore the sin of many.”⁷⁰ However, as Taylor himself acknowledges, “taking away” and “bearing” are different concepts. The idea of taking away is more related to the ritual of the Day of Atonement (Lv. 16.22), especially when it is remembered that the Hebrew for lamb (אֵז) may refer to the young of either sheep or goat. Barrett thinks that the primary reference is to the Paschal lamb.⁷¹ There is much to be said for this, since it was principally the Passover ritual which used the lamb as such. However, the lamb slain at the Passover was not thought to take away sin. Thus, Barrett considers that two ideas are combined here – Christ as the Passover Lamb, and Christ as bearing or taking away sins.

Without settling for one dominant background for the sayings, it may be best to see them as a complex of sacrificial imagery, bringing to the interpretation of Christ’s work many diverse elements of sacrificial practice. For the present purpose, one of these elements is certainly Paschal. The Paschal motif is even more strongly portrayed in the chronology of the Passion. Not only does the Last Supper take place before the celebration of the Passover, but Christ is represented as dying at the time when the Paschal lambs were sacrificed in the Temple. As if to make sure that this fact of the chronology does not escape the notice of his readers, he specifically includes a quotation from the Passover texts in 19.36 – “Not a bone of him shall be broken” (see Ex. 12.46).

In 1 Cor. 5.7, Paul writes, “For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed.” Although there is reference later in the epistle to the Christian sacrament, the idea of the “festival” seems here to be related to the whole life of the Church. This is noteworthy, since the unleavened bread is interpreted, not as the body of Christ, but as “sincerity and truth”.

The problems of 1 Cor. 11, however, are directly the Christian feast itself. The attention is focussed on the commemorative aspect of the meal – “Do this in remembrance of me” (vv. 23,24). The body is τὸ ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν, though in precisely what sense is not made plain. In this eating and drinking the Lord’s death is proclaimed – cf. 1.23 where the preaching of Christ crucified is described as “the power of God” (surely the power of God in delivering his people, as elsewhere in Paul).

If, then, the Lord’s Supper is seen as the Christian commemorative meal of God’s deliverance wrought through the Lord’s death and since he is described elsewhere in this epistle described as the Paschal Lamb, at the very lowest it is possible that the Supper was regarded in some sense as a Christian Passover (though celebrated weekly).

But which came first, the Lord’s Supper as Passover, or Christ as the Paschal Lamb? This cannot be answered conclusively from this passage, though directness of mention may indicate that Christ died by Johannine chronology and the Supper is Paschal because it commemorates the death of the true Paschal Lamb.

⁷⁰ *Jesus and His Sacrifice*, p. 227.

⁷¹ *op. cit.*, p. 147.

8. Conclusion

Taylor has noted, “Whether the Supper was the Passover meal or not, Paschal ideas and associations must have occupied the mind of Jesus on this occasion.”⁷² The evidence suggests that the meal itself had many of the characteristics of a Passover meal, and the arguments against are in the main arguments from silence rather than from positive statements to the contrary. However, there are positive statements in John’s gospel which indicate that the Passover did not take place until the day after the supper and crucifixion. Against this seem to be the Synoptists who assert that the disciples were sent to prepare the Passover.

Without resorting to theories of double dating, it may be best to regard the Last Supper as a Passover held by anticipation, in the knowledge of impending death. This means that it was not a “regular” Passover, since it had to be celebrated without a lamb. But then, from the Johannine chronology, such it had to be, since the true Paschal Lamb yet to be sacrificed was he who was celebrating this meal with his friends. The meal thus took on a new character, since it focussed on him.

The Christian celebration which has stemmed from this meal is not a Passover in the strictest sense, but is a lambless celebration since the true Lamb who has himself been once sacrificed is himself always present. The bread and wine commemorate the deliverance achieved in him. This is avowedly a synthesis, but it seems to account adequately for the differing traditions embodied in the Synoptics, especially as represented by Mark and John.

⁷² *Jesus and His Sacrifice*, pp. 116-7.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (S.P.C.K., London, 1960).
- J.H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John* (T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1928) 2 vols. ICC.
- B.H. Branscomb, *The Gospel of Mark* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1937) Moff. NTC.
- W. Corswant (tr. A. Heathcote), *A Dictionary of Life in Bible Times* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1960)
- C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (CUP., Cambridge, 1959) CGT
- A. Edersheim, *The Temple* (James Clarke, London, reprint 1959).
- B. Gärtner, *John 6 and the Jewish Passover* (Gleerup, Lund, 1959).
- A.J.B. Higgins, *The Historicity of the Fourth Gospel* (Lutterworth, London, 1960).
- A. Jaubert, "Jésus et le Calendrier de Qumrân", *New Testament Studies*, 7, pp.1-30 (C.U.P., Cambridge, 1960).
- J. Jeremias. (tr. A. Ehrhardt), *Eucharistic Words of Jesus*. (Blackwell, Oxford, 1951)
- K.G. Kuhn, "The Lord's Supper and the Communal meal at Qumran" in K. Stendahl (ed.), *The Scrolls and the New Testament* (SCM, London, 1958), pp.65-93.
- E. Stauffer (tr. D.M. Barton), *Jesus and His Story* (SCM, London, 1960).
- V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (Macmillan, London, 1952).
Jesus and His Sacrifice (Macmillan, London, 1951).