
Harmonizing the Synoptics and John's Gospel

(Number 32. Originally published January 28, 1987)

This issue of *The Christian Respondent* offers a change from the usual format which has basically been . a critiquing of certain Watchtower Society doctrines and policies. I have agreed to publish a treatise on a question raised as to the day that Jesus observed the Passover just prior to his death. The synoptic gospels:

Matthew, Mark and Luke place the time as the evening of "the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread," the day that the Passover victim was sacrificed. (Matt.26: 17; Mark ·14: 12; Luke 22:7) John's Gospel seems to indicate a day earlier.

The verse from Mark reads: "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.'" -Mark 14: 12 *New International Version*. The footnote in this translation offers the following observation: "the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. ordinarily this would mean the 15th of Nisan, the day after Passover (see note on V. 1) However, the added phrase, 'when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover· lamb,' makes it clear that the 14th of Nisan is meant because Passover lambs were killed on that day (Ex. 12:6).

The entire eight-day celebration was sometimes referred to as the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and there is evidence that the 14th of Nisan may have been loosely referred to as the 'first day of Unleavened Bread.' "

The Fourth Gospel, however, raises a question in this regard due to the fact that it seems to place events that must have taken place on Nisan 15 a day earlier on Nisan 14. In his recounting of the Lord being brought to the governor's palace the morning after his arrest John writes: "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 *NIV*

This is but one of several scriptures from John's Gospel that appears to contradict the Synoptics. At the Guntersville, Alabama conference this past summer attention was drawn to this apparent contradiction and

the difficulty presented in reconciling the four gospels on this matter. Because many of the readers of *The Christian Respondent* were present at that meeting and heard this question raised, it seems appropriate to offer information that may prove helpful in resolving the difficulty. To this end I have agreed to publish a paper prepared by Jon Mitchell and H. A. (Buddy) Carlton. What follows is the text of that treatise submitted by these brothers:

While some Bible scholars in our day have reached the conclusion that John places the date of Jesus' death one day earlier than the Synoptic Gospel writers, not all agree that this is the case. As noted by Dr. R.V.G. Tasker on page 244 of the *Tyndale New Testament Commentary* on the book of Matthew, "it is by no means certain that the Gospel of John is in contradiction to the other Gospels on this point, though most modern scholars assume that it is." Before discussing the five specific texts in the book of John on which such charges of errancy are based, it would be helpful to have in mind the following background information:

(1) The Jews counted their days from sunset to sunset, not midnight to midnight as we are accustomed to doing. (Lev. 23:32) (2) Whatever the original custom, there is strong evidence that in Jesus' day the Passover feast began on Nisan 15 with the Passover lamb being slain on the afternoon of the 14th. (Ex. 12:3-8; Lev. 23:5)* (3) The Feast of Unleavened Bread followed the Passover meal, beginning the next morning and lasting a week, but the term "Passover" was often used to refer to the entire feast that followed (And vice versa). (Ex. 12:15; Luke 22:1,7) (4) The books of Matthew, Mark and Luke are quite plain in showing that Jesus ate the regular Passover supper on the evening after Nisan 14 (And hence, at the start of the Jewish day, Nisan 15). They clearly state that on the *first day of unleavened bread* Jesus sent Peter and John from Bethany into the city to make preparations for eating the Passover, and on the evening of the same day he ate it with his disciples. (Matt. 26: 17,20; Mark 14:12,17; Luke 22:7,14) There is no question that what was commonly spoken of as being the first day of unleavened bread was Nisan 14. Mark and Luke state plainly that it was on this day that the Passover lamb was sacrificed. Josephus speaks of the feast lasting eight days. **

* The view that Jesus died on Nisan 14 is dependent on the understanding that the expression "between the two evenings" refers to the time between *sunset and darkness* at the start of the Jewish day. The Samaritans and Karaite Jews understood it this way according to this view the Passover lamb was both slaughtered and eaten on Nisan 14. However, the Pharisees and the Talmud considered it to refer to the time between when the sun began to descend (About 3 to 5 o'clock) and sunset at the end of the Jewish day. For obvious reasons, it would seem much more likely that the view supported by the Pharisees and the Talmud was the one which prevailed in Jerusalem in Jesus' day instead of that of the Samaritans, and thus, the Passover lamb would have been sacrificed at the end of Nisan 14 and eaten at the start of Nisan 15 after sundown. According to this view, Deuteronomy 16:6 would have reference to the first of the "two evenings. "

** The book, *Aid To Bible Understanding*, (p. 1274) acknowledges that by Jesus' time "Passover day had come to be generally considered as the first day of the Festival of Unfermented Cakes," and offers the explanation that Matthew 26: 17 could properly be translated "the day before" the unfermented cakes instead of "the first day" in an effort to uphold the view that Jesus died on Nisan 14. However, in so doing, it is clearly ignoring the parallel passages at Mark 14: 12 and Luke 22:7 which state the Passover lamb was sacrificed on that same day, the first day of the unfermented cakes or unleavened bread. So it could not have been Nisan 13 when Jesus sent Peter and John to prepare for the meal because it was the day when the Passover lamb was sacrificed and there is no question that this took place on Nisan 14. Since they ate the meal that evening, this was at the start of the Jewish day Nisan 15.

With these points in mind the five scriptural passages in the book of John which are frequently pointed to as being out of harmony with the Synoptic Gospels are more easily understood. Much of the following information is based on A. T. Robertson's *A Harmony of the Gospels*.

John 13:1,2 "Now before the feast of the Passover ... supper being ended" (A V)

Here the charge is made that Jesus' evening meal with his disciples prior to his death was "before the feast of the Passover" and not the regular Passover meal as the other Gospels indicate. It is felt that this passage and others in the book of John point to the evening *one day before* the Passover as the time for Jesus' last meal with his disciples. However, as shown above, the expression "feast of the Passover" need not be confined to this particular meal but could include the entire festival of unleavened bread. (Luke 22: 1)

Concerning the view that the expression "before the feast of the Passover" could mean 24 hours earlier on the evening prior to this celebration, Greek scholar R. C. H. Lenski writes: "The very phrase in v.I, '*before the feast of the Passover when Jesus knew,*' etc., makes this supper a *part* of the festival. For if this phrase does not intend to bring us to the Passover supper, it is out of place, and John should have written some indefinite adverb like 'already,' this long while.'" Lenski then points out that "at supper" would be a more appropriate way of

translating the expression in verse 2 instead of

"supper being ended" (A V) or "during supper" (R V), and observes that the washing of the feet always took place *before* the meal began and never during its progress or at its end according to Jewish custom. So Jesus purposed to show his love for his disciples in a practical way (verse 1) and did so by washing the feet of his disciples *before* eating this special evening meal (verses 4-12), apparently waiting until the last moment to do so.

This act of love certainly exemplifies the affection Jesus is spoken of as having for his disciples in verse one, many scholars, including Lenski, consider verse one to be separate from the incident which comes after it and more in the form of an introduction or prologue to the following chapters of John. The fact that he "loved them unto the end," (A V) would appear to make it extend beyond the single act of love recorded in this chapter. In the original Greek, of course, there were no chapter and verse divisions nor even divisions between words. So the most natural meaning of this passage is that John is describing what took place at this Passover meal, not some other meal one day earlier. There would be no need to mention the Passover at all if that were the case.

John 13:27,29 "What thou doest, do quickly ... For some of them thought, because Judas had the bag, that Jesus said unto him, Buy those things that we have need of against (RV 'for') the feast. " (A V)

In this particular case the claim is made that the disciples would not have thought that Jesus referred to the feast if the Passover meal was already going on or

was over, so it must have been the day before Passover. It seems evident though that the term "feast" in this instance refers not to the Passover supper but the feast of unleavened Bread which followed and ran a total of seven days and required much more than was needed for the Passover meal alone. If it were the day before the Passover, there would really be no need for hurry since there would still be plenty of time the following day to prepare for the evening Passover meal. Also, as Lenski points out, "on the night following the 13th all activity ceased, and no beggars would be about." The fact that the 14th was a holy day really makes no difference because the Mishna expressly allows for obtaining what was needed for the Passover even on a Sabbath. According to Lenski, "on the night following the 14th and ushering in the 15th there was a great deal of activity. Then everywhere in the city companies of ten to twenty ate the Passover and at the latest hours went home or to their lodgings. The night was treated as though it were daytime. All beggars were about. At midnight the temple gates were opened, for crowds came thus early to get the sacrifices a chagiga (chag, 'feast'), which was killed on the 15th immediately after the morning sacrifices at nine o'clock. Traders were busy on every hand." Hence it seems far more natural to conclude that the misapprehensions of Jesus' disciples arose on the actual Passover evening rather than the day before when the City was quiet and when there would really be no need to hurry anyway. So this passage, too, actually confirms the Synoptic Gospels.

John 18:28 "They themselves went not into the judgment hall, lest they should be defiled; but that they might eat the Passover. "

Since this is definitely after the evening meal of John 13:2 it appears to be a clear contradiction of the other Gospel accounts. Why would the Jews who led Jesus to the Roman Governor fear defilement which could prevent them from eating the Passover if the Passover meal was already over? The expression "eat the Passover" may very well have an application beyond the evening Passover meal. Throughout the book of John the expression "Passover" is used with reference to the Passover festival and not the Passover supper at which the sacrificial lamb was eaten-which is how Matthew, Mark and Luke use the term-so it seems fair to allow John's usage of the term to determine the sense it should be understood as having in this particular text. (e.g., John 2:23; 6:4; 13:1) 2 Chronicles 30:22 refers to the festival of unleavened bread and says "and they did eat the festival seven

days." So it is entirely possible that the expression used in this text, "eat the Passover," means also the celebration of the Passover Festival.

It should be noted, too, that the incident described in this passage took place early in the morning and therefore any uncleanness which might have been contracted would have had no relevance to a supper eaten in the evening since whatever impurities one had during the day passed away in the evening. (cf. Num.19:22) Hence it seems far more logical to conclude that the Passover Festival had already begun and that concern about ceremonial uncleanness was felt due to a desire to participate in the offerings of that day. The whole festival included a number of meals. The other sacrificial meals were called Chagigah. The Chagigah of Nisan 15 was especially attractive because, unlike the solemn evening Passover meal, this was one of great joy and festivity. So this text, too, harmonizes with the other Gospels and makes much more sense when it is understood to refer to the offerings following the Passover meal and not the evening meal itself.

John 19:14 "Now it was the Preparation of the Passover. "

Since this expression is applied to the time when Jesus was before Pilate it is claimed that Christ must have been put to death before he could have eaten the regular Passover meal with his disciples since "the Preparation of the Passover" must refer to the day before Passover. Hence, John seems to disagree again with the Synoptics. However, the term "Preparation" was really the name of a day in the week, the day before the Sabbath or our Friday. Luke 23:54 says concerning this same day on which Jesus died, "and that day was the preparation, and the Sabbath drew on." (A V) The four evangelists use the term only in this sense. (Matt.27:62; Mark 15:42; John 19:31,42) It is never used in the sense of "the preparation" or "the day of preparation" for a festival but only in the sense of the preparation for the Sabbath. Thus the expression is merely describing Friday of Passover Week, which is in full agreement with Matthew, Mark and Luke. Even in modern Greek the term "Preparation" refers to Friday because of the New Testament usage.

John 19:31 "For the day of that Sabbath was a high day. "

Since the Sabbath day which was the day after Jesus' death was a "high day," it is argued from this

that it must have coincided with the first day of the Passover festival. It is claimed that this is what made it a "high" or special or great day-the fact that it was not only the Sabbath but also the first day of the Passover festival. Again, this would seem to indicate that Jesus could not have eaten the regular Passover meal with his apostles but died before then, This conclusion is entirely unwarranted though because the expression "high day" could be applied not only to the coincidence of the first day of the festival with the Sabbath, but to any day of the festival on which the Sabbath fell. (Note, also, how at John 7:37 the last day is called "the great day of the feast.") John is simply saying that the day after Jesus' death was special because it was not only the Sabbath, but the Sabbath which occurred during the Passover festival.

So it is not really contradictory to the accounts presented by Matthew, Mark and Luke. Therefore, the evidence points to the conclusion that Jesus ate the regular Passover meal with his disciples on the evening after Nisan 14 at the beginning of the Jewish day Nisan 15, and likewise died on Nisan 15 on the day of the week which would have corresponded with our Friday. All four Gospel accounts can be harmonized without straining matters. There seems to be no reason to take an adamant position to the contrary. □

The foregoing article demonstrates how commentaries can be helpful in offering solutions to problems presented in scripture. It is true, as Mitchell and Carlton acknowledge, not all Bible scholars agree on this matter. Be that as it may, each of us will have to make a personal determination regarding textual difficulties that present themselves. To this end I would highly recommend the book *Biblical Hermeneutics-a Treatise on the Interpretation of the old and New Testaments*, by Milton S. Terry and published by Zondervan Publishing House, 1415 Lake Drive S .E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49506. This analytical study of

biblical hermeneutics (interpretation) is divided into three main sections: (1) Introduction to biblical hermeneutics, (2) Principles of biblical hermeneutics, and (3) History of biblical hermeneutics. There is a fine bibliography as well an index to the hundreds of scripture texts that are used to illustrate and provide examples for the various principles set forth in this extensive volume. It is available either hardbound or in paperback. I would encourage anyone interested in making a scholarly approach to his Bible reading and study to obtain a copy of this book

Hopefully, we will be able to keep all textual difficulties in perspective by remembering that our faith rests in the persons of the Father and the Son not in the written record *per se*. This is not said to diminish the value of the Bible for it is the sacred record of God's past dealings and revelations of himself to mankind. Whatever problems exist with the received text- real or imagined-in no way changes that fundamental truth. The matter under consideration is a case in point. The Synoptic Gospels and John's Gospel agree to the *fact* of Jesus' final meal and discourse to his disciples. That fact remains unchanged and unchallenged regardless of how we understand the accounts. Again, this is not said to minimize the importance of attempting to reconcile the accounts but, rather, to point out that minor discrepancies or points of controversy do not discredit or negate the more important underlying truths presented in the record of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. These things remain unchanged. The Bible will continue to be the one inspired record of sacred history and an unequalled source of divine wisdom: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."-2 Timothy 3:16,17 *NIV*. □