

# ***WAS THE LAST SUPPER A PASSOVER MEAL?***

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## *Introduction*

**F**or close to 2,000 years, Christians have celebrated the Lord's Supper, an ordinance instituted by Jesus in the Upper Room the night before His crucifixion. That Jesus ate this meal with His disciples is widely acknowledged. What is not as commonly agreed upon, however, is the nature of the meal. Was Jesus' Last Supper the annual Passover meal observed by the Jews, or was it some other kind of meal that sustained no direct demonstrable connection with Israel's Passover? On the surface, this question may seem inconsequential. At a closer look, however, numerous historical, biblical, and theological factors emerge that significantly affect our understanding of the Lord's Supper. This essay examines the biblical data in order to determine what kind of meal Jesus ate with His disciples the night before He died. Was it, or was it not, a Passover meal?

In an effort to address this matter, the following topics will need to be explored. First, in order to gauge the significance of the question, we will investigate the issues at stake in identifying the type of meal Jesus ate with His disciples. Second, we will take a look at the OT background of the Passover in order to acquire the proper historical lens for assessing the NT data. Third, we will address specific arguments by those who suggest that Jesus' Last Supper was not a Passover meal and provide responses that argue for its paschal nature. Finally, we will consider Gospel evidence that favors a paschal interpretation of the Last Supper. The overall picture that will emerge from this investigation will suggest that Jesus did indeed eat a Passover meal with His disciples.

## *The Issues at Stake*

Jesus' Last Supper with His disciples is recorded in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 26:17–30; Mark 14:12–26; Luke 22:7–38),

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where it is clearly portrayed as a Passover meal (Mark 14:12: “On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrifice the Passover lamb, His disciples asked Him, ‘Where do You want us to go and prepare the Passover so You may eat it?’”; Luke 22:7–8: “Then the Day of Unleavened Bread came when the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, ‘Go and prepare the Passover meal for us, so we can eat it’”; cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 16.6.2 §§163–64),<sup>1</sup> a meal that took place on the Thursday night before Jesus was crucified the next day (Friday). When one turns the page from Luke’s to John’s Gospel, however, some contend that the picture appears to change.

According to John’s timeline (13:1), Jesus and His disciples celebrated the Last Supper the day before Jesus stood trial before Pilate (18:28–19:16). For John, this trial seems to have taken place prior to the Jewish Passover meal: “It was early morning. They did not enter the headquarters themselves; otherwise they would be defiled and unable to eat the Passover” (18:28b). If the Jews had not yet eaten the Passover when they tried Jesus, it is argued, Jesus could not have eaten the Passover with His disciples the night before. In apparent further confirmation of this, John states that Jesus’ Last Supper took place “before the Passover Festival” (13:1) and that Jesus’ crucifixion took place on “the preparation day for the Passover” (19:14), that is, on the day before Passover (i.e., Thursday). Thus, for John, it is argued, Jesus ate His Last Supper with His disciples on the Wednesday night of Passion Week (Nisan 14), twenty-four hours before the official celebration of the Passover meal, and Jesus was crucified on Thursday (Nisan 15).

The primary point of tension between the Synoptics and John, then, is readily apparent. The Synoptic writers seem to say that Jesus’ Last Supper constituted a Passover meal, which would have fallen on Thursday night of Passion Week, with the crucifixion having occurred the next day (Friday). John, however, appears to suggest that Jesus ate His Last Supper the day before the Passover meal, which would have fallen on Wednesday night of Passion Week, with the crucifixion having occurred on the next day (Thursday). For those who adhere to a high view of Scripture, these apparent contradictions are certainly significant and raise important questions that need to be addressed: Do the accounts of Jesus’ Last Supper in the Synoptics

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the HCSB.

and John contradict one another? If so, did John alter the Synoptic tradition for theological reasons? Or was Jesus' Last Supper with His disciples but a normal meal which the Synoptics and/or John invested with Passover symbolism in order to validate their particular theology of the cross?

The issues at stake, then, are weighty indeed. First, discerning the type of meal Jesus ate with the disciples the night before His crucifixion has a bearing on the issue of biblical inerrancy. If John and the Synoptics are found to contradict one another with regard to the dating of the Last Supper and the type of meal Jesus observed with His disciples, it would follow that John, the Synoptics, or both are in error. Second, there is the related question concerning the historical reliability of the Gospel traditions. If John, the Synoptics, or both are in error, then one or both are historically unreliable, that is, their record of events does not correspond to what actually happened. Third, if the Last Supper was not a Passover meal, it would be necessary to reassess the theological significance of the Passover for the celebration of the Lord's Supper as it has been conceived throughout church history.<sup>2</sup> The first step, then, in addressing this issue involves an investigation of the OT origin of the Passover.

### *The Old Testament Origins of the Passover*

The Passover was a seminal and constitutive event in the formation of Israel's identity as a nation (Exodus 12, esp. vv. 1–13; cf. Deut 16:1–8).<sup>3</sup> While Moses and the Israelites were chafing under Egyptian bondage, God inflicted a series of plagues on the Egyptians in order to compel Pharaoh to release the Israelites. The tenth and final plague brought a death angel over Egypt to kill every firstborn male, except in houses whose doorframes were smeared with lamb's blood. When the angel saw the blood, he "passed over" that particular dwelling, leaving the firstborn male unharmed.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For a recent survey of the Lord's Supper in the various Christian traditions, see G. T. Smith, ed., *The Lord's Supper: Five Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> For a helpful discussion of the origins of the Passover as narrated in Exodus 12, see B. Witherington III, *Making a Meal of It: Rethinking the Theology of the Lord's Supper* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 2–10.

<sup>4</sup> The English word "Passover," recalling the Hebrew *pesach*, may have been coined by William Tyndale (see Witherington, *Making a Meal of It*, 3).

This plague marked a turning point in Jewish history, not only as a historical event that triggered Israel's exodus from Egypt, but also in the tradition that it began. This tradition became known as "Pass-over" and has been celebrated yearly by Jews on the fourteenth day of the lunar month Nisan, which marked the beginning of the festival calendar and specifically the onset of the Festival of Unleavened Bread. It was no different in Jesus' day. Passover represented an annual celebration in Jerusalem that all men were expected to attend (cf. Deut 16:5–6). As a result, "Large numbers of worshippers from the outlying provinces of Palestine (Luke 2:41–42) and the Diaspora (Acts 2:5) filled the capital city" (cf. Josephus, *J.W.* 2.1.3 §10).<sup>5</sup> This week of festivities, then, provided the setting for Jesus' Last Supper. The question at hand, therefore, is on what particular day of these festivities Jesus ate the Last Supper.

### *Arguments that the Last Supper Was Not a Passover Meal*

In light of the issues at stake and against the above-sketched OT background, we now turn our attention to common arguments that Jesus' Last Supper was not a Passover meal. These arguments are presented in canonical order as they relate to the Synoptics, John, Acts, and Paul. Subsequent to the presentation of a given argument, a response is provided that typically underscores the likelihood that Jesus' Last Supper was in fact a Passover meal.<sup>6</sup>

#### The Synoptics

Although, as mentioned, the Synoptics clearly call the Last Supper a Passover meal (Matt 26:17–30; Mark 14:12–26; Luke 22:7–38), some scholars still contend that it was not.<sup>7</sup> This argument is based on the premise that Matthew, Mark, and Luke label the Supper a Passover meal, although the actual historical meal did not occur on the night of Passover. The evangelists, some maintain, portrayed the Supper as a Passover because they were either mistaken or took theological

<sup>5</sup> A. J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 104.

<sup>6</sup> The following discussion is significantly indebted to J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. N. Perrin (London: SCM, 1966), 15–88.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see S. McKnight, *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005), 259–73. For a brief survey of the Gospel references to Jesus' Last Supper, see Witherington, *Making a Meal of It*, 20–28.

liberties when writing their respective Gospels.<sup>8</sup> The following is a list of arguments with accompanying responses.

Argument No. 1: When recounting the story of Jesus blessing the bread (*artos*), the Synoptics do not feature the technical term “unleavened bread” (*azuma*) that was used for a Passover meal (Matt 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19).<sup>9</sup> Jesus’ serving of leavened instead of unleavened bread, the argument goes, suggests that His last meal was at best a festal meal but certainly not a Passover meal.

Response: Throughout their lexicographical history, *artos* and *azuma* were used interchangeably for both leavened (*artos*) and unleavened bread (*azuma*; Exod 29:2 [cf. MT and LXX]; LXX: Lev 2:4; 8:26; Num 6:15,19; Judg 6:20; Philo, *Spec.* 2.158). Moreover, the showbread (i.e., the “bread of the Presence” kept on the table in the Holy Place; Exod 25:30; Lev 24:5–9; Num 4:7; 2 Chr 2:3), although unleavened (Philo, *Spec.* 2.161; *Congr.* 168; *Contempl.* 81; Josephus, *Ant.* 3.6.6 §142; 3.10.7 §255), is always simply called “bread” (*artos*) in the OT, Mishnah, Targums, and the LXX. Thus the Synoptics’ use of *artos* rather than *azuma* proves nothing except that they were most likely aware of the synonymous uses of these terms.

Argument No. 2: Certain elements of the meal were an integral part of every Jewish Passover. Two especially important ingredients were the paschal lamb (Exod 12:3) and bitter herbs (Exod 12:8). Scot McKnight, for example, suggests that had a lamb been consumed in the Upper Room, it would have made more theological sense for Jesus to say something like “this lamb is my body” rather than “this bread is my body.” For this reason, McKnight contends that it is “incomprehensible” that Jesus, as well as the Synoptic writers, would have failed to mention the lamb if it had been present.<sup>10</sup> Since the Synoptic accounts mention neither the paschal lamb nor the bitter herbs, the argument goes, the Last Supper could not have been a Passover meal.

<sup>8</sup> McKnight argues that Mark should be given historical precedence over Matthew and Luke since it is “the most primitive account” (McKnight, *Jesus and His Death*, 262–64). This, however, unnecessarily assumes that closer historical proximity *mandates* better accuracy. It also further presupposes that all three Synoptics cannot be simultaneously correct. Especially, in light of Richard Bauckham’s recent argument that the NT Gospel writings represent eyewitness accounts (see his *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006]), the relative close historical proximity of these writings to one another suggests that McKnight’s arguments are overstated.

<sup>9</sup> J. Wellhausen, “Ἄρτον ἔκλασεν, Mc 14, 22,” ZNW 7 (1907): 182.

<sup>10</sup> McKnight, *Jesus and His Death*, 270.

Response: This is an argument from silence. Simply because the Synoptics do not explicitly mention these elements does not mean that they were absent from the meal. Perhaps the evangelists left out these details for personal and/or narrative reasons. Most likely, Mark, for example, did not intend to present a complete description of the Last Supper but rather chose to focus on those “moments which were constitutive for the celebration of the primitive Church.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, these elements were so common at Passover meals that to mention them was tantamount to stating the obvious. This was apparently the case in *m. Pesah*. 10:3, where the author refers to the eating of the paschal lamb only in passing.<sup>12</sup> Another possible reason for the lack of explicit reference to these elements is that the primary focus of the Synoptic accounts of the Last Supper is on Jesus and not on the recounting of the details of the Passover meal. In addition, it is possible that Luke mentions the paschal lamb indirectly (22:15)<sup>13</sup> and that Matthew’s and Mark’s references to “dip[ping] . . . in the bowl” may subtly allude to the eating of bitter herbs (Matt 26:23; Mark 14:20). McKnight’s speculation about Jesus’ theological motives for focusing on the bread is mere conjecture. It should be noted that Jesus’ focus in the present context is on His broken body in light of His imminent crucifixion. Bread—which could easily be broken—lent itself as an eminently suitable metaphor for the message Jesus sought to convey. There is no compelling reason why He must choose to focus on the lamb. In the end, as mentioned, this argument is one from silence, as McKnight himself rightly concedes, and utterly fails to convince in light of more plausible explanations.<sup>14</sup>

Argument No. 3: There are three elements in the Synoptics’ description of the Last Supper that are inconsistent with the Passover ritual: (1) Mark portrays Jesus as saying the blessing before breaking the bread, while at the Passover this is reversed; (2) the Synoptics portray Jesus and His disciples as using a single cup, while the use of individual cups was the norm during Passover meals; and (3) at a Passover meal, each person was to have his or her own dish, but at the

<sup>11</sup> Jeremias, *Words*, 67.

<sup>12</sup> Jeremias concludes from *m. Pesah*. 10:3 that we have here “precisely the same combination of historical report and cultic ritual as [found] in the texts describing the Last Supper, and in both cases we can observe the same thing happening: [The] cultic ritual overshadows the historical facts and concentrates attention upon the continuing rites” (*Words*, 67; emphasis original).

<sup>13</sup> C. K. Barrett, “Luke XXII.15: To Eat the Passover,” *JTS* 9 (1958): 305–7.

<sup>14</sup> McKnight, *Jesus and His Death*, 270.

Last Supper Jesus and His disciples apparently ate from one common dish (Matt 26:23; Mark 14:20).<sup>15</sup>

Response: First, as Jeremias points out, the opposite scenario is actually true for the Jewish Passover: The bread was broken first, followed by a blessing, which is how the events are described in the Synoptics.<sup>16</sup> Marshall further observes that those who suggest otherwise erroneously base their arguments on late Jewish sources.<sup>17</sup> Second, given the lack of first-century data on the order of the Passover service, Marshall rightly suggests that “it seems impossible to conclude with any certainty what the practice in the first century was.”<sup>18</sup> That said, Jeremias detects one clue that may shed light on this issue: later protests against the drinking from multiple cups (*t. Ber.* 5:9; 12:9) suggest that the practice of drinking from a single cup had occurred earlier on.<sup>19</sup> Third, this argument may hold true for Passover observance subsequent to AD 70 when the city of Jerusalem was not as crowded during the celebration. Prior to the year 70, however, having one's own table was unlikely in light of the overcrowding of the city. In such cramped conditions, it is unlikely that everyone had his or her own table and individual dishes.<sup>20</sup>

Argument No. 4: The religious leaders in Mark 14:2 do not want to arrest Jesus “during the festival” (*en tē heortē*) because they fear a riot will ensue among the people. Thus the portrait painted by Mark (“not during the festival”) seems to put Jesus' arrest in apparent conflict with Matthew and Luke, who place Jesus' arrest on the night of the first day of the festival.<sup>21</sup>

Response: Two considerations cast doubt on the above understanding of Mark 14:2. First, as Jeremias notes, it is unclear whether or not the religious leaders' desire was fulfilled. It is entirely possible

<sup>15</sup> Jeremias, *Words*, 67–71. For a chronological description of the events at a Jewish Passover meal, see W. Barclay, *The Lord's Supper* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 22–25.

<sup>16</sup> Jeremias, *Words*, 68–69.

<sup>17</sup> I. H. Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 62.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 63. If Jesus did indeed break the normal custom, Marshall contends, it “is possible that Jesus deliberately adopted a special way of distributing the wine in order to draw an unusual lesson from it” (*ibid.*).

<sup>19</sup> Jeremias, *Words*, 69. Heinz Schürmann argues that Jesus and His disciples indeed shared a common cup and adopted a new way to distribute the elements in order to deliberately break the normal custom (*Der Paschamahlbericht* [Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1953], 60–61).

<sup>20</sup> Jeremias, *Words*, 70–71.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 71–73.

that though the religious leaders did not want to arrest Jesus during the feast, they later decided to do so anyway.<sup>22</sup> Mark may note the intention of the leaders and then recount the opposite taking place to emphasize that prophecy was fulfilled, against the expectations and plans of the religious leaders. One possible scenario is that when Judas came to the authorities and told them where Jesus was, they viewed the opportunity as so ripe that they decided to act, even though initially they had other plans. And hence prophecy was fulfilled. Alternatively, *en tē heortē* may be used locally/spatially (“in the presence of”) rather than temporally (“during”).<sup>23</sup> If so, the thrust of Mark’s statement would be that the religious leaders wanted to arrest Jesus “by stealth” (14:1), that is, remove Him from the public eye quietly rather than “in the presence of the festal crowd” in order to avoid public attention.<sup>24</sup> This would correlate well with the statement in Luke 22:6: “when the crowd was not present.”<sup>25</sup>

Argument No. 5: In light of *m. Pesah.* 8:6 (“They may slaughter [the Passover lamb] . . . for one whom they [the authorities] have promised to release from prison”), prisoners who were freed during the festival (Matt 27:15; Mark 15:6; John 18:39) must have been released in time to partake of the Passover meal.<sup>26</sup> Thus, if the prisoner in the Matthean and Markan accounts would have been tried and released on Friday rather than Thursday, he would not have had a chance to eat the Passover meal. According to some, this fits well within the Johannine chronology where Jesus’ trial takes place on Thursday before the Passover meal that evening, thus giving the released criminal a chance to partake, but it contradicts the Synoptic chronology where the trial takes place on Friday after the meal.

Response: The weakness of this argument consists in the fact that there can be no certainty that *m. Pesah.* 8:6 refers to a Roman Passover amnesty. In other words, there is no indication that this was a widely imposed Roman policy. Furthermore, as J. Merkel has noted, there is a fundamental difference between *m. Pesah.* 8:6 and the amnesty

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 71–73. As evidence that τῆς ἑορτῆς can entail a reference to “festal crowds,” Jeremias (ibid., 72) cites Ps 73:4 LXX; 117:27 LXX; John 2:23; 7:11; and Plotinus, *Enneades* 6.6.12.

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Marshall, who contends that this understanding is “undoubtedly correct” (*Last Supper*, 166, n. 18); see also C. Burchard, “Fussnoten zum neutestamentlichen Griechisch,” *ZNW* 61 (1970): 157.

<sup>25</sup> Marshall, *Last Supper*, 64; Jeremias, *Words*, 73.

<sup>26</sup> Jeremias, *Words*, 73.

referred to by the Gospel writers, namely *m. Pesah*. 8:6 promises release while in the Gospels the release actually occurs.<sup>27</sup>

Argument No. 6: Mark 14:17–15:47 records at least ten events that could not have taken place on Nisan 15 (Friday), the first day of the festival of Unleavened Bread, because they contradicted Jewish festal regulations:<sup>28</sup> (1) Jesus visited Gethsemane the night of the Passover (14:32). This is problematic because a Passover adherent was not to leave Jerusalem during the night of Passover; what is more, the meal had to be eaten within the walls of Jerusalem. (2) The temple guards and the disciples carried and wielded weapons at Jesus' arrest (14:43; cf. Matt 26:47, John 18:3), which was not allowed on feast days. (3) In response to Jesus' perceived blasphemy, the high priest tore his clothes (14:63), an action forbidden during the Passover. (4) Removal of Jesus' body from the cross and the rolling of the stone to enclose the tomb (15:46) broke Jewish regulations. (5) Mary and Mary Magdalene prepared spices for Jesus' body (16:1), another act forbidden during feast days. (6) The Jews participated in the Roman trial during the feast (15:1–15). Such participation was forbidden. (7) Jesus was executed on the first day of the feast (15:21–32). (8) Simon from Cyrene, who was forced to carry Jesus' cross, was "coming in from the country" (15:21), which indicates, first, that he apparently traveled a great distance, which was forbidden on Sabbaths and feast days; and second, since he was coming in from the countryside, he was apparently working, which was forbidden as well. (9) Joseph purchased a linen shroud in which to bury Jesus (15:46). (10) The Sanhedrin met and condemned Jesus during the night of the Passover feast (14:53), which broke the Mishnaic code: "None may sit in judgment . . . on a feast day" (*m. Beṣah* 5:2; *t. Beṣah* 4.4).

Response: The first five arguments, Jeremias maintains, "rest upon sheer ignorance of the halakah . . . and should never be mentioned again."<sup>29</sup> (1) Although a Passover adherent could not leave Jerusalem during the night of Passover and the Passover had to be eaten within the walls of Jerusalem, he or she could spend the night in the greater Jerusalem district. Gethsemane was well within this district.<sup>30</sup> (2) It is uncertain whether Nisan 14/15 was subjected to the regulations of

<sup>27</sup> J. Merkel, "Die Begnadigung am Passahfeste," *ZNW* 6 (1905): 306–16.

<sup>28</sup> Jeremias, *Words*, 74–79.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>30</sup> See *ibid.*, 43, n. 2.

feast days. Moreover, according to early halakah, the bearing of arms was permitted on the Sabbath (*m. Šabb.* 6:4).<sup>31</sup> (3) Tearing a robe did not constitute the breaking of a regulation (*m. Šabb.* 13:3). (4) Deuteronomy 21:23 was equally applicable to a feast day: “You are not to leave his corpse on the tree overnight but are to bury him that day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse.” (5) Preparations for the dead, even on feast days, were acceptable (*m. Šabb.* 23:5).

The next two arguments, (6) and (7), pertain to the Roman governor and not the Jewish authorities. Execution during a holy time is not completely unprecedented during this era. For example, Polycarp was executed by the Romans in c. AD 155 on the “high Sabbath” (*Mart. Pol.* 21; cf. 8.1). In this account, note that the Jews carried wood to the pile (*Mart. Pol.* 13.1). Luke and John offer two further examples: the residents of Nazareth attempted to execute Jesus on a Sabbath (Luke 4:29), and the Jews planned to stone Jesus during the Festival of Dedication (John 10:22–39). Shedding more light on this issue is Carson, who notes that the Mishnah “insists that the execution of a rebellious teacher should take place on one of the three principle feasts [Unleavened Bread/Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles]” in order to deter particular kinds of conduct.<sup>32</sup> Apart from these considerations, those who participated in the trial were apparently not concerned about the other legal aspects of the proceedings. For example, the verdict was predetermined from the outset (Mark 14:1; John 11:50); false testimony was sought and encouraged (Matt 26:59); and the high priest put Jesus under oath, but the Sanhedrin condemned Jesus on the basis of His testimony (Matt 26:63–66). That aspects of the law were broken during the course of Jesus’ trial, therefore, does not present a problem with regard to Jesus’ final meal with His disciples being a Passover.

(8) The argument about Simon of Cyrene traveling in “from the country,” Jeremias rightly avers, rests on arbitrary assumptions.<sup>33</sup> First, Simon probably did not come from working in the fields since it was still early in the morning (Mark 15:25). Second, the field could have been within the distances permitted for travel on a Sabbath. Third,

<sup>31</sup> See Barclay, *Lord’s Supper*, 29; C. L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007), 225–26; and F. F. Bruce, “The Trial of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Gospel Perspectives*, ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT, 1980), 7–20.

<sup>32</sup> D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *EBC* 8:532.

<sup>33</sup> Jeremias, *Words*, 76–77.

it is not altogether clear that Simon came in from the fields since *ap' agrou* ("from the country") can possibly connote "from the village" or "from outside the city."<sup>34</sup> If these connotations are plausible, Simon could have resided just outside of Jerusalem and have been on his way to morning prayer (cf. Acts 3:1). Finally, we cannot be certain that Simon was a Jew. For a Gentile, walking long distances on a feast day was an insignificant matter.

The final two arguments, according to Jeremias, are the only ones that should be taken seriously.<sup>35</sup> (9) On the day of Jesus' crucifixion, Joseph "bought some fine linen" (Mark 15:46) in which to bury Jesus. The purchasing of this cloth is problematic if, as Mark states, it occurred on "preparation day" (15:42), since buying and selling was forbidden on such days. By way of response, Jeremias marshals ample evidence to demonstrate that the regulations against buying and selling on rest days were relaxed due to the necessities of everyday life.<sup>36</sup> For example, *m. Šabb.* 23:4 explicitly approves of the buying and selling of food, a coffin, and a shroud on a feast day. Another example from *t. Šabb.* 17.13 confirms this:

And he said [on the Sabbath] to him: if you cannot get it at the designated place, fetch it from such and such a place; and if you cannot get it for one mina (100 denarii) then get it for 200 (denarii). R. Jose b. Judah [c. AD 180] said: "Only he must not mention the exact price" (cf. *b. Šabb.* 151a).

A particular case specifically related to Passover is recounted in *m. Šabb.* 23:1:

So, too, in Jerusalem on the eve of Passover when it falls on a Sabbath, a man may leave his cloak [as surety with the seller] and eat his Passover lamb and make his reckoning with the seller after the feast day.

In light of these pieces of evidence, it is certainly reasonable that Joseph purchased a burial cloth without significant practical or religious infractions.

Finally, (10) the Sanhedrin and Jesus' condemnation to execution would not have occurred on the night of the Passover (Mark 14:53–65).<sup>37</sup> This argument is based on a law valid at the time of the Mishnah that forbade such an act: "None may sit in judgment . . . on

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 77–79.

<sup>36</sup> See *ibid.*, 77–78.

<sup>37</sup> This argument applies equally to the Johannine account (18:12–13, 19–24).

a feast day” (*m. Beṣah* 5:2; cf. *t. Beṣah* 4.4 [207.15]; Philo, *On the Migration of Abraham* 91). By way of response, first, the degree to which given stipulations included in the Mishnah were applicable at the time of Jesus is uncertain.<sup>38</sup> Apart from this issue, Jeremias offers a convincing interpretation of the Deuteronomic mandates concerning legal gatherings on feast days.<sup>39</sup> In essence, he argues that a close reading of Deut 17:8–13 requires that one sentenced to die during the feast be executed on the day of the feast.<sup>40</sup> What is more, it should come as no surprise that since the trial as a whole contained numerous irregularities, its timing was in violation of commonly accepted practice as well.<sup>41</sup>

## John

As mentioned above, there are some indications that in John the Last Supper took place one day earlier than in the Synoptics (on Wednesday rather than Thursday night of Passion Week). This apparent contradiction is the most problematic biblical feature for determining the nature of Jesus’ last meal with His disciples. Marshall notes that there are three basic solutions to this problem: (1) John’s dating is historically accurate and the Synoptics are inaccurate; (2) the Synoptics are historically reliable and John is inaccurate; or (3) both are correct.<sup>42</sup> Those who defend the first solution usually do so because they find the evidence in the Synoptics self-contradictory while John’s Gospel is internally consistent.<sup>43</sup> John’s account, therefore, is chosen by default.<sup>44</sup> Those who defend the second solution believe

<sup>38</sup> J. Blinzler, *The Trial of Jesus* (Westminster: Newman, 1959), 149–57.

<sup>39</sup> See Jeremias, *Words*, 78–79.

<sup>40</sup> See *ibid.* for the complete argument.

<sup>41</sup> Marshall, *Last Supper*, 65.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 67. Of course, a fourth possibility is that both the Synoptics and John are historically inaccurate. For the relevant bibliography, see the sources mentioned in McKnight, *Jesus and His Death*, 265, nn. 20–22.

<sup>43</sup> Recall arguments from the previous section.

<sup>44</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, PNTC 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 455–56. See R. T. France, “Chronological Aspects of ‘Gospel Harmony,’” *VE* 16 (1986): 50–54, for a variation of this approach. France concludes that John’s chronology is accurate (i.e., Jesus ate the Last Supper on Wednesday evening), and the Synoptics concur. For a summary of France’s argument, see Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 456. More recently, McKnight takes this position (*Jesus and His Death*, 271–72).

that John introduces “an historical anomaly in order to gain a theological point.”<sup>45</sup> This argument goes as follows:

Jesus is not only the true temple [in John], the true light, the true vine, but the true paschal lamb: John places Jesus' death at the time of the slaughtering of the paschal lambs [on Thursday instead of Friday] in order to establish this next step in his replacement motif.<sup>46</sup>

Carson is correct to point out, however, that this theory is “theologically flimsy” because John's focus during Jesus' Last Supper was neither on the slaughter of the lambs nor on Jesus as the true Lamb of God. Moreover, as Carson rightly notes, this solution does not address John's alleged historical contradiction with the Synoptics.<sup>47</sup>

The third solution, namely that both John and the Synoptics are correct, best squares with the available data.<sup>48</sup> One popular resolution in this regard is put forth by Annie Jaubert. She argues, based on different calendars used in the first century, that John and the Synoptics are consistent in their portrayal of the Last Supper. While Jesus and His disciples followed the solar calendar of the Qumran community, the Pharisees and Sadducees followed a lunar calendar. These two calendars differed from each other sufficiently to allow for the Synoptics to record accurately the occurrence of the Passover meal on Thursday evening and for John to record it accurately on Wednesday evening.<sup>49</sup> The major weakness of this view is that there is no NT (or other) evidence to suggest that Jesus ever adhered to a Qumran calendar.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 456.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Against C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 50–51; R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John XIII–XXI*, AB 29B (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), 556; and R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, trans. C. Hastings et al. (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 3.36.

<sup>49</sup> A. Jaubert, *The Date of the Last Supper* (New York: Alba House, 1965). Cf. Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 457. Agreeing with Jaubert is E. Ruckstuhl, *Chronology of the Last Days of Jesus*, trans. V. J. Drapela (New York: Desclee, 1965). More recently, I. H. Marshall, in an update of his 1980 *Lord's Supper* volume, suggests that calendrical differences, although only hypothetical, “make[s] the best sense of the evidence” (“Chapter 11 – The Last Supper,” in *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus*, ed. D. L. Bock and R. L. Webb, WUNT 247 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009], 559).

<sup>50</sup> For a full critique of Jaubert, see J. Blinzler, “Qumran-Kalendar und Passionchronologie,” ZNW 49 (1958): 238–51. See also N. Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 649–70. For briefer critiques, see Carson, “Matthew,” 530–32; L. A. Foster, “The Chronology of the New Testament,” in *EBC* 1:599.

Carson rightly concludes that such “calendrical theories all involve delicate historical judgments or a paucity of hard evidence.”<sup>51</sup>

Other, less widely held views that seek to harmonize John and the Synoptics include the following:<sup>52</sup> (1) Jesus, knowing that He would be killed at the Passover, celebrated a private Passover with His disciples one day early.<sup>53</sup> (2) Jews in Jesus’ day celebrated the Passover on two consecutive days.<sup>54</sup> (3) The vast number of lambs needing to be sacrificed at the Passover caused the Galileans to slaughter their lambs on Nisan 13.<sup>55</sup>

Ben Witherington, finally, boldly proposes that in John, “we have a portrayal of a Greco-Roman banquet complete with closing symposium and the religious rites associated with such a meal. Jesus acts here as the sage, philosopher, and rhetor and offers his after-dinner teaching.”<sup>56</sup> This representation, however, unduly neglects the clear Passover setting and symbolism pervading John’s Gospel.<sup>57</sup> The harmonization of the Synoptic and Johannine accounts, for its part, depends on an accurate exegetical understanding of the three most problematic passages related to John’s rendition of the Last Supper (13:1; 18:28; and 19:14), to which we now turn.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 457. Cf. Köstenberger, *John*, 400, n. 1.

<sup>52</sup> See also Marshall, *Lord’s Supper*, 71–75; H. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 81–90; and Blomberg, *Historical Reliability*, 222–23.

<sup>53</sup> R. H. Fuller, *The Mission and Achievement of Jesus*, SBT 12 (London: SCM, 1954), 70–71; V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1966), 664–67. The major problem with this view is that Mark 14:12 places Jesus’ Last Supper on the day on which the lambs were slaughtered (but see R. T. France, “Chronological Aspects of Gospel Harmony,” VE 16 [1986]: 50–54).

<sup>54</sup> D. Chwolson, *Das letzte Passamahl Christi und der Tag seines Todes*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: H. Haessel, 1908), 20–44. Cf. J. Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teachings*, trans. H. Danby (New York: Allen & Unwin, 1947), 326–28; and M.–J. Lagrange, *The Gospel of Jesus Christ*, trans. Members of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1947), 193–96. For a modification of Chwolson’s theory, see Str-B 3.812–53.

<sup>55</sup> J. Pickl, *The Messiah*, trans. A. Green (St. Louis: Herder, 1946), 120–22.

<sup>56</sup> Witherington, *Making a Meal of It*, 65; Witherington contends that the meals narrated in the Synoptics and John “are two different meals” (p. 80; see his treatment of John 13–17 in chap. 4). Witherington’s entire discussion is highly idiosyncratic, including his identification of the “disciple Jesus loved” as Lazarus (pp. 68–79). For an adjudication of the historical setting of John’s Gospel, see A. J. Köstenberger, *The Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, BTNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 51–86.

<sup>57</sup> See the discussion below.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Köstenberger, *John*, 400–402, 524, 537–38; id., *Encountering John*, EBS (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 146; Blomberg, *Historical Reliability*, 223–24; Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 460–61, 589–90, 603–4.

*John 13:1*

Argument: John says that the night before Jesus was crucified (and when the Last Supper was eaten) was “before the Passover Festival” (*pro de tēs heortēs tou pascha*; 13:1). Since the meal was eaten before the Passover, it cannot be a Passover meal.

Response: Most likely, the phrase refers to the footwashing only, which took place just before Jesus ate the Passover, not to the meal itself.<sup>59</sup> As Carson notes, “Theologically, the clause alerts the readers to the Passover theme developed throughout the book (2:13,23; 6:4; 11:55; 12:1; cf. 18:28,39; 19:14), inviting them to see in the footwashing an anticipation of Jesus’ own climactic Passover act as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (1:29).”<sup>60</sup> Alternatively, the reference in 13:1 may be to Jesus already knowing prior to the Passover that His hour had come to depart from this world.<sup>61</sup>

*John 18:28*

Argument: On the morning after Jesus’ last meal with His disciples, He was led from Caiaphas to Pilate for an impromptu trial. At this trial, the Jews sought to avoid ceremonial uncleanness by refusing to enter Pilate’s Gentile palace so that they would be able to “eat the Passover” (*phagōsin to pascha*; 18:28). Since the Passover meal occurred after the events described in 18:28 (i.e., Jesus’ trial), Jesus did not eat a Passover meal the night before with His disciples (13:1).

Response: This argument assumes that the phrase “eat the Passover” (*phagōsin to pascha*) refers only to the Passover meal proper (i.e., the Thursday evening meal). It is more likely, however, that this phrase refers

not merely to Passover itself but to the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which lasted seven days (note Luke 22:1: “the Feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover”), and in particular to the feast-offering (*hagigah*), which was brought on the morning of the first day of the festival (cf. Num 28:18–19).

<sup>59</sup> Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 460.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 460–61.

<sup>61</sup> So Geldenhuys, *Luke*, 657; cf. L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 545, who notes that the expression “is perhaps not as precise as most such notes.” See also K. A. Mathison, *Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin’s Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), 206–7; and Jeremias, *Words*, 80, with reference with Zahn, Bauer, and Bultmann.

“Eat the Passover” probably simply means “celebrate the feast” (cf. 2 Chron 30:21).<sup>62</sup>

In other words, John’s use of *phagōsin to pascha* was tantamount to referring to “the many meals and celebrations that week in the Passover season.”<sup>63</sup> The Jews in 18:28, then, were not referring to the Thursday night Passover meal. When interpreted in this way, John’s chronological account of the trial does not conflict with the Synoptics.

*John 19:14 (cf. 19:31,42)*

Argument: John says that Jesus’ crucifixion took place on “preparation day” (*paraskeuē*; 19:14), which was the day before Passover, that is, the day set aside by the Jews to prepare for the Passover meal. During Jesus’ Passion Week, the day of preparation fell on Thursday. Thus, John places the crucifixion on Thursday, which means that Jesus ate His last supper with His disciples the night before on Wednesday (against the Synoptics).

Response: As I have written elsewhere,

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Josephus all use *παρασκευή* to refer to the day preceding the Sabbath.<sup>64</sup> The term therefore should be taken to refer to the day of preparation for the Sabbath (i.e. Friday).<sup>65</sup> If this is accurate, then *τῷ πάσχα (tou pascha)* means not “of the Passover,” but “of Passover week.”<sup>66</sup> Indeed, ‘Passover’ may refer to the (day of) the actual Passover meal or, as in

<sup>62</sup> Köstenberger, *John*, 524. Cf. Geldenhuys, *Luke*, 649–70, see esp. 661–63; Carson, “Matthew,” 531; and W. L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 498.

<sup>63</sup> G. M. Burge, *The Gospel of John*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 499. Cf. Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 590; C. C. Torrey, “The Date of the Crucifixion according to the Fourth Gospel,” *JBL* 50 (1931): 239–40; and T. Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. J. M. Trout et al. (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1977), 3:282–83. L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 778–79, disagrees, suggesting that *πάσχα* cannot refer to the Feast of Unleavened Bread apart from the Feast of Passover. Carson rightly retorts, however, that John’s use of *πάσχα* does not exclude the Passover meal but refers to the entire Passover festival (*Gospel according to John*, 589–90).

<sup>64</sup> Matt 27:62; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54; Josephus, *Ant.* 16.6.2 §§163–64.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. *Did.* 8:1; *Mart. Pol.* 7.1. See Torrey, “Date of the Crucifixion” (including his critique of Str-B 2.834–85 on pp. 235–36); A. J. B. Higgins, “Origins of the Eucharist,” *NTS* 1 (1954–55): 206–9; C. I. K. Story, “The Bearing of Old Testament Terminology on the Johannine Chronology of the Final Passover of Jesus,” *NovT* 31 (1989): 318; Blomberg, *Historical Reliability*, 223–24; Morris, *John*, 708; and H. N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John*, trans. J. Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 606.

<sup>66</sup> So correctly the NIV (although TNIV has “Passover”). See also Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 604; against Barrett, *John*, 545; Brown, *John*, 882–83, 895. Also against those who, like Morris (*John*, 684–95, esp. 604–95), contend that Jesus and the temple authorities followed different calendars, with the Synoptics using Jesus’ calendar (according to which the meal was

the present case, the entire Passover week, including Passover day as well as the associated Feast of Unleavened Bread.<sup>67</sup> "Day of Preparation of Passover week" is therefore best taken to refer to the day of preparation for the Sabbath (i.e. Friday) of Passover week. Thus, all four Gospels concur that Jesus' last supper was a Passover meal eaten on Thursday evening (by Jewish reckoning, the onset of Friday).<sup>68</sup>

Apart from the above-cited evidence in 13:1; 18:28; and 19:14 that, instead of contradicting the Synoptic accounts, John's depiction of Jesus' Last Supper confirms them, there is substantial additional corroborating evidence in John's Gospel that aligns his account with that of the other canonical Gospels.<sup>69</sup>

#### *Additional Corroborating Evidence in John*

Further traces of the Synoptic chronology occur in John 13:2–17. That this is the same scene as the Passover meal in the Synoptics is confirmed by the account of Jesus' interchange with Judas the betrayer at the Last Supper (13:18–30) and the narrative of Judas' betrayal of Jesus and of Jesus' arrest in Gethsemane (18:1–11). John makes at least seven remarks that presuppose a Passover meal: (1) the meal occurred in Jerusalem (11:55; 12:12); (2) it took place at a late hour that lasted into the night; (3) it was celebrated with Jesus' closest circle of disciples (instead of with a larger group, as usual); (4) it was a ceremonial meal (recall the reclining at the table); (5) Jesus did not return to Bethany but stayed in the Garden in the Kidron valley; (6) the meal was taken in a state of Levitical purity (13:10); and (7) the disciples assumed that Judas was to purchase necessities for the feast or to distribute alms (13:29).<sup>70</sup>

Beyond these traces of the Synoptic chronology, John presents Passover symbolism in chaps. 13–17 that is unique to his Gospel:

(1) Jesus' use of "vine" imagery in 15:1–10 may be predicated upon his and the disciples' partaking of wine just prior to his use of this imagery at the Passover meal.<sup>71</sup>

the Passover) and John using that of the temple authorities (according to whom the sacrificial animals were slain the following day; hence, Jesus was sacrificed as our Passover).

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 14.2.1 §21; 17.9.3 §213; *J.W.* 2.1.3 §10; Luke 22:1.

<sup>68</sup> Köstenberger, *John*, 537–38, with reference to Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 603–4.

<sup>69</sup> Jeremias, *Words*, 81. Marshall, without exegetically engaging the Johannine data, argues that an "attempt to re-interpret the Johannine material to make it agree with the Synoptic dating involves a somewhat artificial reading of the crucial texts" ("Last Supper," 559).

<sup>70</sup> These seven points come from Jeremias, *Words*, 81–82.

<sup>71</sup> J. K. Howard, "Passover and Eucharist in the Fourth Gospel," *SJT* 20 (1967): 335.

- (2) The “bearing” and “taking away” language in John 15–17 may hark back to similar terminology in the reference to Jesus as the “Lamb of God” in 1:29.
- (3) “Glory” language binds together a cluster of motifs that center on Jesus’ crucifixion as his glorification, a theology that is significantly indebted to Isaiah’s depictions of the Suffering Servant, who . . . “was led like a lamb to the slaughter” (53:7).<sup>72</sup>

In light of the assessment of John 13:1; 18:28; and 19:14 above, and in view of the subtle traces of paschal characteristics in 13:1–17 and elsewhere, it seems amply justified to conclude that the Synoptic and the Johannine accounts concur that Jesus ate a Passover meal with His disciples on the Thursday night prior to His crucifixion on Friday.

### Acts

Argument: In Acts 2:42, one finds an early reference to the first Christians’ celebration of the Last Supper (“the breaking of bread”). This passage indicates that Jesus’ Last Supper was not a Passover meal because the early church celebrated this particular supper daily (Acts 2:42), while the Passover meal was celebrated annually. The question arises as to how faithful Jews, who were taught from childhood to observe the Passover annually, could legitimately celebrate it on a daily basis.

Response: The faulty presupposition underlying this argument is that the early Christians in Acts 2:42 were seeking to replicate Jesus’ Last Supper; rather, they sought to relive the “daily table fellowship of the disciples with [Jesus].”<sup>73</sup> “Only gradually,” Jeremias observes, “was the early Christian celebration of meals linked with, and influenced by, the remembrance of the Last Supper.”<sup>74</sup> In other words, nothing in the text indicates that the disciples or Luke, the author of Acts, intended to portray a Passover or eucharistic meal. What is more, Marshall adds, “[What] Jesus told the disciples to repeat was not the Passover meal [per se] but a particular ritual within that meal.”<sup>75</sup>

### Paul

Argument No. 1: In the context of a practical discussion on how to deal with an immoral church member, Paul states, “For Christ our

<sup>72</sup> Köstenberger, *Theology of John’s Gospel*, 418. See the entire discussion on pp. 417–20.

<sup>73</sup> Jeremias, *Words*, 66.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Marshall, *Last Supper*, 63.

Passover has been sacrificed" (1 Cor 5:7). Paul, doubtless a committed Jew who understood the intricacies of the Passover activities, clearly identified Jesus as the Passover Lamb that was sacrificed. The Passover lamb was always sacrificed on Nisan 14 (on Thursday in the case of Passion Week). Paul, therefore, in comparing Jesus to this sacrificed Passover lamb, implicitly placed Jesus' crucifixion on Thursday rather than Friday. Thus Jesus' Last Supper with His disciples occurred the night before the Passover on Wednesday night, which was not the evening of the Jewish Passover.

Response: Jeremias rightly notes that Paul's comparison of Jesus to the Passover lamb more likely is linked to Jesus' broader sayings about Himself during the meal than to the actual time of His crucifixion.<sup>76</sup> Paul's point was not to present a chronological account of Jesus' last earthly meal. Instead, he more likely focused on the deeper theological implications of the event. No astute first-century Jew could miss the correlation between Jesus' identity and the Passover events. To argue that Paul had in mind the chronology of the specific Passover events, as Marshall rightly argues, "is surely to press the allusion too far."<sup>77</sup>

Argument No. 2: In 1 Cor 15:20, Paul calls Jesus the *aparchē tōn kekoimēmenōn* ("firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep"). Jewish firstfruits were offered on Nisan 16, which fell on the Saturday of Jesus' Passion Week. Paul's statements about Jesus as the firstfruits, then, suggest that Jesus rose from the dead on Saturday rather than on Sunday (against the Synoptics). If Jesus rose from the dead on Saturday, His crucifixion must have taken place on Thursday, with the Last Supper having occurred on Wednesday (Nisan 14), the day before Passover.

Response: This interpretation presses Paul's figurative use of *aparchē* too far. More likely, Paul intends a use of *aparchē* that more directly coincides with *prōtos* ("first").<sup>78</sup> As in 1 Cor 5:7, Paul's concern is not primarily that of Passover chronology.<sup>79</sup> It is exegetically naive to import chronological assertions concerning Jesus' resurrection into Paul's statement when the context suggests that Paul's primary concern was theological.

<sup>76</sup> Jeremias, *Words*, 74.

<sup>77</sup> Marshall, *Last Supper*, 64.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. BDAG 98.

<sup>79</sup> Marshall, *Last Supper*, 65.

### *Subtle Evidence that Favors a Paschal Interpretation*

The discussion above focused on specific exegetical details in the relevant NT documents and concluded that Jesus ate a Passover meal with His disciples before dying on the cross. In this section, attention is focused more broadly on subtle pieces of evidence in the Gospels that are more indirect in nature.<sup>80</sup> The fact that these references are largely incidental, Jeremias suggests, “adds very considerably to their value as evidence,” since they serve no particular purpose in the respective Gospel accounts.<sup>81</sup> The following twelve subtle pieces of evidence further demonstrate the paschal nature of Jesus’ Last Supper.

(1) According to all four Gospel writers, the Last Supper took place in Jerusalem (Matt 26:18; Mark 14:13; Luke 22:10; John 13:1), which, during the Passover festivities, was direly overcrowded.<sup>82</sup> After entering Jerusalem during the last week of His life, Jesus spent His days teaching and ministering in the city but spent His nights in Bethany and the Mount of Olives (Matt 21:17; Mark 11:11,19; 14:3; Luke 22:39). Why would Jesus, who had friends and acquaintances in Jerusalem, not stay there overnight, which would have been more convenient than traveling to nearby towns? One possibility is that the city was too overcrowded to do so. In light of the cramped conditions in Jerusalem, one rightly wonders why Jesus chose to eat His Last Supper there. The answer, according to Jeremias, most likely is that the Passover lamb was expected to be eaten within the city gates.<sup>83</sup>

(2) Matthew (26:20), Mark (14:17), John (13:30), and Paul (1 Cor 11:23) all observe that the Last Supper took place at night. In Jesus’ culture, two meals per day were customary, one between around 10 and 11 o’clock in the morning<sup>84</sup> and one in the late afternoon.<sup>85</sup> The afternoon meals lasted into the night only on special occasions.<sup>86</sup> One particular special occasion is most pertinent to Jesus’ Last Supper, namely Passover. All the available data indicates that the Passover

<sup>80</sup> This section is adapted from Jeremias, *Words*, 41–62.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>82</sup> For examples of the living conditions and problems that surfaced due to Jerusalem’s overcrowding, see Josephus, *J.W.* 2.1.3 §12; *Ant.* 17.9.3 §217.

<sup>83</sup> *Sipre Num.* 69 on 9.10; *Num. Rab.* 7.8 on 5.2. See Jeremias, *Words*, 43, n. 6.

<sup>84</sup> *b. Šabb.* 10a (*bar.*); *b. Pesah.* 107b; *Tg. Qoh.* 10.16–17. Note that in Acts 2:15, at 9 o’clock in the morning, the people had still not eaten breakfast.

<sup>85</sup> *Mek. Exod.* 18.13; *m. Šabb.* 1:2; *b. Pesah.* 107b. Cf. Jeremias, *Words*, 44–45.

<sup>86</sup> *Deut. Rab.* 9.1 on 31.14; *Midr. Qoh.* on 3.2.

meal was to be eaten at night.<sup>87</sup> Since the Last Supper breaks with the common tradition of eating in the late afternoon, it most likely occurred during a special occasion. This special occasion was in all probability the Passover meal, since the Last Supper took place sometime during the Passover festival.

(3) Matt 26:20 and Mark 14:17 tell us that Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with the Twelve (see also Luke 22:14: “and the apostles with Him”).<sup>88</sup> Jesus more often ate with larger groups of people (Mark 2:15; 14:3; Luke 7:36; 11:37; 14:1; cf. Matt 11:19). In light of this common practice, Jesus’ limiting His table companions at the Last Supper to the Twelve is telling. The Passover meal had to consist of at least ten people,<sup>89</sup> which was also its average number of participants.<sup>90</sup> This was so because a one-year-old lamb would feed about ten people. Jeremias poses the question, “Is it chance that the small group in some ways corresponds to the Passover practice?”<sup>91</sup>

(4) All four Gospel writers record that Jesus and the Twelve ate the Last Supper while reclining at table (*anakeimai*; Matt 26:20; Mark 14:18; Luke 22:14 [*anapitō*]; John 13:23,25). That Jesus and His followers reclined at table while eating this meal is significant because when the Gospel writers speak of reclining at meals, they refer to special meals in the open, at a party, a feast, a royal banquet, a wedding feast, or at the end-time banquet.<sup>92</sup> From the Gospel accounts, it is clear that Jesus and His disciples would not have reclined at table

<sup>87</sup> Exod 12:8; Jub. 49.1, 12; *m. Zebah*. 5:8; *t. Pesah*. 1.34 (cf. 158.4); 10.9 (cf. 172.27); *y. Pesah*. 5.31d.27; *Sipre Deut*. 133 on 16.6; *Mek. Exod*. 12:6; Josephus, *Ant*. 18.2.2 §29. McKnight rightly asserts that the extant evidence is late and sparse concerning festal meals. In light of this, he suggests that it is “overzealous to think that only a *Pasah* meal could be eaten at night” (*Jesus and His Death*, 268). The evidence may be sparse, but it is a stronger foundation upon which to build a historical reconstruction than McKnight’s speculations.

<sup>88</sup> As D. L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1719, n. 6, points out, “Luke likes to use this term [i.e. ‘apostles’] for the Twelve” (with reference to 6:13; see id., *Luke 1:1–9:50*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994], 541–42). See the thorough discussion in Köstenberger, *Theology of John’s Gospel*, 77–78.

<sup>89</sup> *t. Pesah*. 4.3; *b. Pesah*. 64b; *Midr. Lam.* on 1.1; Josephus, *J.W.* 6.9.3 §§423, 425.

<sup>90</sup> According to Jeremias, both Josephus and the Talmud witness to this fact. This number, on occasion, could be exceeded (*m. Pesah*. 8:3).

<sup>91</sup> Jeremias, *Words*, 47. Marshall balances this, however, by reminding us that “this particular point cannot be regarded as a compelling one since we have no proof whatever that Jesus usually ate with a larger company of people, and also since it is possible that some of the women associated with the followers of Jesus were present at the last meal” (*Last Supper*, 59). He does not explain why he thinks women could have been present. And it seems unlikely since the text restricts those present to the apostles or the twelve.

<sup>92</sup> For biblical references and further discussion see Jeremias, *Words*, 49.

during ordinary meals. That they did so during the Last Supper, then, indicates that they had a “ritual duty to recline at table as a symbol of freedom.”<sup>93</sup> Such a ritual duty coheres well with the Last Supper being a Passover meal.<sup>94</sup>

(5) John seems to indicate that the Last Supper was eaten in a state of Levitical purity (13:10; cf. Num 19:19). Such Levitical purity was not required of ordinary people for the eating of regular meals. But when a person partook of the Passover, this called for ritual purity.<sup>95</sup>

(6) Matthew (26:21–26) and Mark (14:18–22) indicate that Jesus broke the bread during the course of the meal instead of at its outset. This is telling because ordinary meals in Jesus’ day customarily began with the breaking of bread.<sup>96</sup> It was only during the Passover meal that a dish was served prior to the breaking of bread.<sup>97</sup> This is most clearly indicated in a record preserved from antiquity of a young child’s question to his father about the Passover meal of which they were partaking: “How is it that on every other evening we dip bread into the dish but on this evening we simply dip (without bread) into the dish” (y. *Pesah.* 10.37d, 4–5)?<sup>98</sup>

(7) Jesus served wine at the Last Supper (Matt 26:29 and parallels). This is notable since water was usually the drink of choice in everyday life and at ordinary meals and since wine was reserved for festive occasions.<sup>99</sup> Drinking wine at Passover was not optional but mandatory, even for the poor (*m. Pesah.* 10:1). Most notable concerning the wine at the Last Supper was the fact that it was red, which is indicated by Jesus’ comparison of it to His blood. At least three types of wine were available in Talmudic times: red, white, and black. R. Judah (c. D 150), who, according to Jeremias, represents an older tradition, specifically required that Passover participants drink red wine (*t. Pesah.* 10.1

<sup>93</sup> Jeremias, *Words*, 49 (emphasis original). Extrabiblical literature reveals that such reclining at the Passover symbolized freedom from bondage (y. *Pesah.* 10:37b, 53–54). Exodus 12:11, as Jeremias observes, “was regarded as a rule that was valid only for the actual exodus itself” (*Words*, 49).

<sup>94</sup> Marshall cautions, however, that “reclining was a feature of festive meals in general and was not confined to the Passover meal” (*Last Supper*, 59).

<sup>95</sup> Marshall rightly notes, however, that this is a “somewhat precarious deduction from the text, and it should be received with considerable caution” (*Last Supper*, 59).

<sup>96</sup> See Marshall, *Last Supper*, 21–23, for a description of the Jewish Passover meal.

<sup>97</sup> The festival meals of some upper-class citizens notwithstanding. See Jeremias, *Words*, 49.

<sup>98</sup> This assumes Mark’s order can be trusted (Marshall, *Last Supper*, 60).

<sup>99</sup> *b. Pesah.* 109a (Bar.). See Jeremias, *Words*, 50, nn. 8–11.

[172.14]; *b. Pesah*. 108b).<sup>100</sup> In addition, according to R. Jeremiah (c. AD 320), the use of red wine at Passover was binding.<sup>101</sup>

(8) On the night of the Last Supper, some of the disciples thought that Jesus told Judas to “buy what we need for the festival” (John 13:29). The idea of making these purchases at night would make no sense if these events occurred on the evening before Nisan 14 (Wednesday), since all the local businesses would have been open the next day (Thursday). If these events, however, occurred on the evening of Nisan 15 (Thursday, the day before Passover), then the disciples’ supposition would make perfect sense; they would assume that Judas must make his purchase “quickly” (John 13:27), because businesses would be closed the next day in celebration of Passover.<sup>102</sup>

(9) When Jesus told Judas, “What you’re doing, do quickly” (John 13:27), some of the disciples thought Jesus meant for Judas to “give something to the poor” (13:29). Again, this piece of evidence makes most sense on the assumption that the Last Supper was a Passover meal, because it was customary to give alms to the poor on the night of Passover.<sup>103</sup>

(10) At the end of the Last Supper, Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn (Matt 26:30; Mark 14:26). According to Jeremias, this hymn can only be the second half of the Passover hallel, a common recitation after Passover meals. Marshall concurs: “There seems to be no evidence for a similar occurrence at the end of any other kind of Jewish meal.”<sup>104</sup>

(11) Instead of returning to Bethany after the Last Supper where He had spent the preceding nights (Matt 21:17; Mark 11:11), Jesus spent the night on the Mount of Olives (Mark 14:26). Based on an exegesis of Deut 16:7, those observing Passover were required to spend the

<sup>100</sup> Jeremias, *Words*, 53.

<sup>101</sup> Marshall notes that a different color of wine could have been used “if the point of comparison was its fluidity rather than its colour” (*Last Supper*, 60). But this seems more implausible than the wine simply being red.

<sup>102</sup> For an explanation of why businesses would allow purchases on the evening before Passover, see Jeremias, *Words*, 53. E. Schweizer dismisses this argument by suggesting that this was a literary device used by John (*The Lord's Supper according to the New Testament*, trans. J. M. Davis [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967], 31). But Marshall rightly notes that “even a literary device would have to be convincing to the readers” (*Last Supper*, 61).

<sup>103</sup> See Jeremias, *Words*, 54.

<sup>104</sup> Marshall, *Last Supper*, 61. It is unlikely that this description of the Last Supper was based on the early Christian practice (i.e., in Mark's day) of singing a hymn at the conclusion of the church's observance of the Lord's Supper (E. Schweizer, *The Good News according to Mark*, trans. D. H. Madvig [Atlanta: WJK, 1970], 307; see Marshall, *Last Supper*, 61).

night in Jerusalem. Since, as mentioned, the population of Jerusalem increased dramatically during the Passover festival, the city district was enlarged each year to make obedience to this command possible. Although Bethany fell outside of the enlarged district of Jerusalem, the Mount of Olives, including Gethsemane, was well within it. Jesus' breaking His pattern of returning to Bethany in order to remain within the district of Jerusalem may indicate that He was preparing for the Passover by being obedient to this traditional observance.

(12) While partaking of the Last Supper, Jesus spoke words of interpretation over the bread and the wine (Matt 26:26–29 and parallels). According to Jeremias, “Interpretation of the special elements of the [Passover] meal is a fixed part of the Passover ritual.”<sup>105</sup> In other words, it was customary that the head of the family explained certain elements of the Passover meal. In doing so, there were often historical (Philo, *Spec.* 2.158; Josephus, *Ant.* 2.15.2 §316; *Sipre Deut.* 130 on 16.3) or allegorical (Philo, *Spec.* 2.158, 159–61; *Congr.* 161–67; QE 1.15; *Sipre Deut.* 130 on 16.3; *b. Pesah.* 36a; 115b) interpretations placed on the elements of the Passover meal.<sup>106</sup> Most important, however, were the eschatological interpretations of the unleavened bread that were often given (*Midr. Song* on 1.8).<sup>107</sup> In the same way, Jesus, clearly in a ritualistic context, offered an eschatological interpretation of the bread and wine during His Last Supper with the disciples (Matt 26:29 and parallels). In light of the established tradition to offer such interpretations, Jesus' Last Supper was most likely a Passover meal. Jeremias avers that this final piece of evidence represents the most compelling argument.<sup>108</sup>

## Conclusion

When Jesus sat down to eat His last meal with His disciples, it was in celebration of the Jewish Passover that commenced on the eve of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. The Synoptics, John, Acts, and Paul concur in their portrayals of this supper. This unified portrayal is confirmed both by a close exegetical examination of all the pertinent passages and by the subtle pieces of evidences these writers left behind. Proposed historical, theological, and canonical inconsistencies related

<sup>105</sup> Jeremias, *Words*, 56.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 58.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 59.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 55. Against Schweizer, *Lord's Supper according to the New Testament*, 31.

to Jesus' Passover meal prove lacking under close scrutiny. Jesus' last meal, indeed, was in celebration of the Jewish Passover. With this fact secured, we are now in the position to explore its many theological implications.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>109</sup> I would like to acknowledge the competent help of my research assistant, Keith Campbell, in preparing this chapter. Keith was an invaluable help as I worked with him closely in reviewing the available literature and in crafting the argument of the present essay.