

Jesus and the Passover – A Question of Timing

Dr. Jack Kinneer, Adjunct Professor of NT Studies for the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary

This presentation was offered for alums and friends of RPTS on March 18, 2008. By request, it is being made available here along with questions and answers that were raised (which are provided at the beginning of the slides for convenience).

- **Responses From Inaugural Webinar Participants:**
- "This is great - please continue these broadcasts in the future."
- "The Webinar is a great tool and I plan to log in for every one of them."
- "Thank you all so very much for the interesting and informative web conference by Dr. Jack Kinneer. I learned a lot and am grateful for being able to participate."
- "I look forward to more in the future!"

Jesus and the Passover – A Question of Timing

Dr. Jack Kinneer, Adjunct Professor of NT Studies for the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary

Q: We also use “Easter” to refer to the entire 50-day season from the Feast of the Resurrection until Pentecost.

Dr.K: This is another example of the term “Easter” being used for a period of time. Thanks for adding this information.

Q: What is the significance of the Sabbath being a high day in John 19:31?

Dr.K: The Sabbath was a high day because it was the Sabbath during the Passover Festival. And Jerusalem was filled with Jews from all over the Empire.

Q: Certainly “The Preparation Day” was a well-known description used to speak of the day before the Sabbath. However, can you show that it was used to describe a day before a festival or feast? Lenski said this: *Paraskeua is never used in the sense of “the preparation” or of “the day of preparation” for a festival but only in the sense of the preparation for the Sabbath.*

Dr.K: The phrase “Day of Preparation of the Passover” occurs only in John. So it is not a basis for establishing any pattern. But the genitive construction represented by “of the Passover” cannot have the value “during”. We can see this genitive usage in John 3:2. Further, the use of paraskeua is never used to describe the preparations for a festival.

Q: How are the three days and three nights calculated?

Dr.K.: This is an interesting question, but not related to our topic today. A brief answer can be found in the older commentators. For example, Adam Clarke’s commentary on Matthew.

Jesus and the Passover

A Question of Timing

-- Dr. Jack Kinneer, Adjunct Professor of NT
Studies, RPTS

When Did Jesus Die?

- After the Passover supper?
 - Matthew, Mark and Luke
- Or before the Passover supper?
 - John

The Synoptic Accounts

- In Matthew, Mark and Luke it is obvious that Jesus was arrested the night after the Passover supper, was tried and crucified the next day.
- *ESV Matthew 26:17, 19, 20* Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?" ... and they prepared the Passover... When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve.

In John's Gospel

- But the language of John's Gospel suggests that Jesus died during the preparation for the Passover supper.
- *ESV John 18:28* Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could **eat the Passover**.
- *ESV John 19:14* Now it was **the day of Preparation of the Passover**. It was about the sixth hour. He [Pilate] said to the Jews, "Behold your King!"

The Verbal Conflict

- The use of “prepare” and “Preparation” in these passages makes it very difficult for an English reader to escape a sense of conflict between the accounts.
 - In the Synoptics, the disciple “prepare the Passover.”
 - In John the trial and crucifixion takes place on the “day of Preparation of the Passover.”
- Furthermore, the phrase in John “eat the Passover” to an English reader means to eat the Passover supper of roasted lamb.

The Conflict

- So the English reader is led to the conclusion that in Matthew, Mark and Luke Jesus held the Passover supper, was arrested, tried and crucified.
- But in John the Jewish leaders arrested Jesus, brought him to Pilate, and he was crucified before the Passover supper took place.

The Supposition

- This verbal conflict has led to the suppositions:
 - that Jesus ate the Passover a day earlier than the official Passover as kept by the chief priests and the Sanhedrin.
 - or that John has “moved” the event in time for a theological purpose.
- For a review of theories of this sort, see I Howard Marshal, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper*, pp. 71-75.

Some wonderful theology

- Based on such suppositions, it would appear that in John's Gospel that Jesus died during the time of the sacrifice of the Passover lambs from the ninth to the eleventh hour.
- This is certainly an appealing thought. How appropriate that Jesus, the lamb of God, should die when the lambs were being sacrificed.
 - See Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, pp. 130-131 for some reflections on this.

But a nasty historical conflict

- But this supposition produces a nasty historical conflict between the Synoptics and John.
 - Matthew, Mark and Luke do not in any way suggest that Last Supper occurred a day earlier than the official feast.
- Rather, both Mark and Luke explicitly place the Last Supper on the night after the sacrifices of the Passover lambs.

Mark and Luke are clear!

- *ESV Mark 14:12* And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him, "Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?"
- *ESV Luke 22:7* Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. ⁸ So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat it."

Mark 14:12

- The “they” in “they sacrifice the Passover lamb” undoubtedly means the priests.
 - There is no evidence that the priests sacrificed some lambs a day early to accommodate a differing calendar.
- Nor is it plausible that the chief priests and the Sanhedrin would have allowed this to take place.
 - After all, it was the Sanhedrin that determined the beginning of Passover and regulated the festival calendar.

Luke 22:7

- The phrase rendered “on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed” certainly expresses the notion of the official day.
- The Greek termed used [dei] means “it is necessary” or “it is required.”
 - BDAG “of the compulsion of law or custom... *when the paschal lamb had to be sacrificed* Lk 22:7.—Mt 23:23; Lk 11:42; 13:14; J 4:20, 24; Ac 15:5; 18:21 v.l. Of the compulsion of Roman law 25:10.”
- Luke clearly indicated that Jesus celebrated the Passover on the official night for the Passover.

So...

- In English there is an obvious verbal conflict between the Synoptics and John.
- But do the Synoptics really conflict as historical accounts with the account in John's Gospel?
- Was Jesus crucified on the day after the Passover supper, or was Jesus crucified on the day of Preparation of the Passover supper?

Yes!

- Both statements are true.
- All four accounts are accurate.
- There is no “real” conflict.

English customs of usage

- When we read these passages in English, we “naturally” interpret them in terms of our knowledge of English customs of word and phrase usage.
- Passover means the Passover supper of roasted lamb. That is all it means.
- But Passover was the beginning of a week long festival. We call that week-long event, the feast of Unleavened Bread.

English Customs of Usage

- Likewise, the day of Preparation of the Passover means the day you prepare to eat the Passover supper of roasted lamb.
- So for an English reader, the phrases “the day of Preparation of the Passover” and “eat the Passover” obviously refer to the Passover supper.
- We would never use such phrases to designation a day of the week (Friday) or the entire feast of Unleavened Bread.

Jewish Greek Customs of Usage

- But when we ask the question “How did ancient Jews use words like “Preparation” [paraskeua] and “Passover” [pascha], we will be on the road to resolving the problem we experience as English readers.
- This is more than just looking up the Greek words in a lexicon, but involves studying the use of words and phrases in context to determine the patterns of contextual usage that control meaning.

The special use of paraskeua

- The Greek term **paraskeua** [preparation] has both a common and a special usage among Jewish and Christian writers in the 1st Century.
 - In its common usage, it can refer to any sort of preparations for any event. This parallels the English term “preparation.”
 - But it has a special usage for which the English translation of “preparation” is inadequate.
- **Paraskeua** is used as the name of the 6th day of the week (our Friday). The use of the term as a day designation is derived from the practice of preparing on the 6th day to keep the Sabbath.

The Christian Version

- The Christians continued this terminological practice, but substituted “Lord’s day” for “first of Sabbath(s)”.

– Lord’s Day	Sunday [kuriaka]
– Second of Sabbath(s)	Monday
– Third of Sabbath(s)	Tuesday
– Fourth of Sabbath(s)	Wednesday
– Fifth of Sabbath(s)	Thursday
– Preparation	Friday
– Sabbath	Saturday

Where do we find this terminology?

- We find this day terminology in the titles of a few of the Psalms in the Old Testament in Greek (Septuagint), in the New Testament narratives, in Josephus and in the early the Christian writers called the Apostolic Fathers.

An Example from the Didache 8:1

- Do not let your fasts be with the hypocrites, for they fast the second of sabbaths and the fifth, and you fast the fourth and preparation (**paraskeuan**).
 - I have translated this woodenly so you can see the usage.

An Example of paraskeua as a day name in Josephus

- *JOE Antiquities of the Jews 16:163* it seemed good to me and my counsellors, according to the sentence and oath of the people of Rome, that the Jews have liberty to make use of their own customs, according to the law of their forefathers, as they made use of them under Hyrcanus the high priest of the Almighty God; and that their sacred money be not touched, but be sent to Jerusalem, and that it be committed to the care of the receivers at Jerusalem; and that they be not obliged to go before any judge on the Sabbath day, nor on **the day of the preparation** to it, after the ninth hour...

Examples of paraskeua as a Day Name in the Synoptics

- *ESV Matthew 27:62* The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation [paraskeua], the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate...
- *ESV Mark 15:42* And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation [paraskeua], that is, the day before the Sabbath...
- *ESV Luke 23:54* It was the day of Preparation [paraskeua], and the Sabbath was beginning.

Examples in John

- *ESV John 19:31* Since it was **the day of Preparation**, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away.
- *ESV John 19:42* So because of the **Jewish day of Preparation**, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

Consensus

- According to the Synoptics and John, Jesus died and was buried on **Paraskeua** (the day before Sabbath).
- All four use the term **Paraskeua** in the same way, as a designation for the day before Sabbath.

Could it be...

- Could it be that the only other use of **paraskeua** in John (or the rest of the NT), is also a reference to the day before Sabbath?
- *ESV John 19:14* **Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover.**
 - Does this mean it was the day to prepare for the Passover supper?
 - Or does it mean it was the day before Sabbath during the Passover festival?

All the Gospels

- All the gospels, John included, identify the day of Jesus' trial, crucifixion and burial as the 6th day of the week which in Jewish Greek is **paraskeua**.
- The phrase "the **paraskeua** of the Passover" could simply mean that it was the 6th day of the week during Passover.
 - The Genitive construction represented in English as "of the Passover" can have the value "during." See John 3.2.

But in English...

- But in English the phrase “the Preparation of the Passover” means the day on which one prepares the Passover meal.
- How, then, can the phrase “the day of the Preparation of the Passover” mean the day **after** the Passover supper?
- Besides, do not the Synoptic references to the disciples preparing the Passover sound just like John’s “the day of Preparation of the Passover?”

Not the same word family

- The phrase in John “the day of the Preparation [paraskuea] of the Passover” sounds in English like the same thing as “Where will you have us go and prepare [etoimazo] for you to eat the Passover?”
 - But I have included the Greek terms above so you can see that two different terms are used.
- So the sense of sameness in English is not nearly as strong in Greek.

Two uses of Passover

- The term Passover in Greek [**pascha**] has two patterns of usage also.
- It can mean the Passover supper on the night Nissan 14.
 - This is how we use the term.
 - This is how the Matthew, Mark and Luke use the term.
- But “Passover” [**pascha**] was also used to designate the week long festival (Unleavened Bread).

An English Parallel

- In English we use the term "Easter" to refer to the day celebration of resurrection of Jesus.
 - "I'll see in Church on Easter."
- But we also use "Easter" to refer to the entire week long celebration.
 - "What are your doing this Easter? I'm going to go to Maundy Thursday service, then go see my parents on the weekend. I'll go to church there on Sunday."
- While we can distinguish "Easter" from "Holy Week" we can also use "Easter" as a synonym for "Holy Week."

So too...

- We find the same variation in usage for “Passover” [pascha] that we just observed for “Easter.”
- Passover [pascha] can mean the Passover supper or the it can mean the Passover festival that lasted for a week.

Passover as Unleavened Bread in Josephus

- *Wars of the Jews 2:10* And, indeed, at the feast of unleavened bread, which was now at hand, and is by the Jews called the Passover...
- *Antiquities of the Jews 14:21* Because this happened at the time when the feast of unleavened bread was celebrated, which we call the Passover...
- *Antiquities of the Jews 18:29* As the Jews were celebrating the feast of unleavened bread, which we call the Passover...

There can be no doubt

- In these texts, Josephus tells his readers the language custom of the Jews is that they refer to the week long festival of Unleavened Bread as simply Passover [pascha].
- There can be no doubt that “Passover” [pascha] can mean either the meal of the first night, or the week long event.
- And Josephus himself uses Passover [pascha] as the week long festival in his narrative.

An Example in Josephus

- *JOE Antiquities of the Jews 20:106* When that feast which is called the **Passover** was at hand, at which time our custom is to use unleavened bread, and a great multitude was gathered together from all parts to that feast, Cumanus was afraid lest some attempt of sedition should then be made by them; so he ordered that one regiment of the army should take their arms, and stand in the temple cloisters, to repress any attempts of sedition, if perchance any such should begin...

Passover as week long festival

- The threat of sedition caused the Roman authority to station guards in the Temple. It would make no sense to do this only during the Passover meal (when Jews were in private dwellings for the meal). But it obviously refers to guards stationed during the week long celebration when a threat of sedition could arise from the crowds thronging the temple all week long.
- In this passage, Passover [**pascha**] means the week long feast.

So then...

- So then, ancient Jews used the term “Passover” both to refer to the evening meal of the first day, and to refer to the week long festival.
- How, then do we know which meaning to assign to any specific passage.
 - It depends on the context.
 - It depends on the custom of usage of the specific writer.

Context and Custom of Usage in John

- When we turn to John's Gospel we discover he uses "Passover" for the week long festival, just like Josephus says the Jews do.
- And we discover that in the contexts of 18:28 and 19:14 the meaning "Passover festival" makes better sense than the meaning "Passover supper."

Unlike the Synoptics

- Unlike the Synoptics, John never uses the term “Unleavened Bread” [azumos].
- This, at the least, raises the question of whether John uses Passover the way Josephus says Jews do, so that there is no need to use the term “Unleavened Bread” to refer to the week long festival.

"Passover" in context

- Twice in John's Gospel he uses the term "Passover" [**pascha**] in such a way that it must mean the week long event and cannot mean only the first night meal.
- In other words he uses "Passover" to mean "Passover Festival" rather than "Passover meal."

An Example in John

- *ESV John 2:23* Now when he was in Jerusalem at the **Passover** Feast [in the Passover in the Feast], many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.
- That Jesus performed signs during the week long festival is the meaning of this passage. If he had done so only during the Passover meal no one would have seen the signs since all were in private dwellings in small companies eating the meal.

A Second Example

- *ESV John 18:39* But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover [in the Passover]. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?"
- It makes no sense to take this to mean "I should release one man for you at the **Passover supper.**"
- But it make perfect sense that "I should release one man to you at the **Passover festival.**"

The usage of John

- John, like the Synoptics, uses **paraskeua** [preparation] as a name for the sixth day of the week.
- John, like the Synoptics identifies the day of Christ's crucifixion as the 6th day of the week, **paraskeua**.
- John, like Josephus, uses "Passover" [**pascha**] for the week long festival.

So then...

- So then, it is not a stretch to take his phrase “the day of Preparation of the Passover to mean “the sixth day of the week during the Passover festival.”
- And if that is what he means, then, there is no conflict between John and the Synoptics.

The tables have turned

- Since we have established that John used **paraskeua** as a the equivalent of our “Friday,”
- And since we have established that John identified the day of Christ’s death as **paraskeua** in two passages in which there is no doubt that the term is a day of the week name,
- And since we have established that John uses “Passover” [**pascha**] for the week long festival,
- Then...

Then...

- Then the natural or unforced meaning of “the day of Preparation of the Passover” is simply “Friday during the Passover Festival.”
- To take the phrase instead as a reference to preparing for the Passover meal is to ignore John’s custom of usage and the indications in the context.

To eat the Passover

- Finally, to “eat the Passover” in John’s custom of usage means to eat the week long feast of unleavened bread.

But...

- The statement in John 18:28 **still** seems to refer to eating the Passover meal.
 - “so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover.”
 - This is because it is hard to get away from limits of what is plausible in terms of English usage.
- Since John elsewhere uses Passover in the sense of the Passover festival, we can better represent the force of the Greek by translating the text:
- “so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover festival meals.”

Unclean till evening

- As others have pointed out, the reference to being unclean confirms that the Jews were referring to the daily Passover festival meals of unleavened bread, not the late night Passover supper of roasted lamb, because such uncleanness contracted by entering Pilate's dwelling would have expired at sunset.
 - It would not have interfered with eating the first night's supper (which took place after sunset), but would have interfered with the noon and early evening meals of the days after first night's supper.
 - [Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, p. 177]

Confirmation in context

- Once we have discovered John's usage, then we can reread John's gospel and another problem of interpretation is resolved.

John 13:1-2

- *ESV John 13:1* Now before the **Feast of the Passover**, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² **During supper**, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him...

The contextual sense

- Since verse 1 refers to the approaching Passover, the reference in verse 2, "during the supper," seem to be a reference to the Passover supper.
- This implication in context is strengthened by two other factors.

Two factors

- The phrase “during supper” in Greek is better rendered as “and when the supper was taking place” [kai deipnou yinomenou].
 - In Greek it seems very much to describe the arrival of what was about to happen in verse 1 (“before the feast of the Passover).
- In the Synoptics it is at the Last Supper that Jesus dips the bread with Judas as he does here in John 13:26
 - *ESV John 13:26* Jesus answered, “It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it.” So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot.
 - *ESV Mark 14:20* He said to them, “It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with me.

So then...

- So then, when we consider the customs of language usage, the context of the narratives, the apparent tensions between John and the Synoptics disappear.
- John, like the Synoptics, narrates the last supper (but gives us additional material), indicates that Jesus died the day after the supper, that is, Preparation day (6th day of the Week), and arose on first day of the week.

The appearance of conflict

- The appearance of conflict is the result of our ignorance of ancient language customs and our dependence on English customs of usage to determine the meaning.
- Carefully literary analysis and linguistic research will, time and again, vindicate the Gospels from the charges of error and inaccuracy so commonly lodged against them.

A final translation

- Thus the correct English translations of the texts are:
- John 18:28b "And they did not come into the Governor's palace so that they might not be defiled, but might be able to eat the Passover festival meals."
- John 19:14a "It was Friday, the Preparation Day, during the Passover festival..."