

## When Did Jesus Celebrate the Last Supper?

ON THE SURFACE, the Synoptic Gospels appear to contradict the Gospel of John concerning the date of the Last Supper. All four Gospels agree that Jesus died on Good Friday a few hours before sundown and the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath. However, the Synoptic Gospels have Jesus celebrating the Last Supper as a Passover meal prior to Good Friday (Mt 26:17; Mk 14:12; Lk 22:15), while John's Gospel seems to indicate that the Passover was not celebrated by Jewish authorities until the evening of Good Friday itself (Jn 18:28; 19:14). How can Jesus have celebrated the Passover *before* his crucifixion (Synoptics) when the Passover did not begin until several hours *after* his death (John)?

Some deal with this problem by denying that the Last Supper was a Passover meal. Others suggest that Passover did indeed fall on the evening of Holy Thursday, but that John manipulated the historical facts for theological reasons in order to present Jesus as the true paschal Lamb. Still others hold that Jesus celebrated an anticipatory Passover one day ahead of the official date. Unfortunately, none of these views is satisfactory. Two main solutions, however, have been proposed to reconcile the accounts in John and the Synoptics. Both rely on the findings of modern scholarship as well as ancient traditions of the Church.

### The Calendar Proposal

Some maintain that Jesus, when he celebrated the Last Supper, followed an alternative Jewish calendar in which Passover fell on Tuesday night instead of Friday night. Thus, the Synoptic Gospels correctly describe the Last Supper as a Passover meal, whereas John correctly notes that Jewish authorities did not celebrate the feast until the evening of Good Friday. Four considerations are said to favor this solution. (1) It is clear that Judaism was divided over the acceptance of a liturgical calendar in the first century. Authorities in control of the Jerusalem Temple followed a *lunar* calendar in which feast days fell on a different day each year but other Jewish groups such as the Essenes and the Qumran community preferred a *solar* calendar in which annual festivals always fell on the same day of the week year after year. Passover, for instance, was always held on Tuesday night (the first hours of Wednesday) according to the solar calendar. Given this situation, it is conceivable that Jesus followed the Essene calendar instead of the Temple calendar when he celebrated his final Passover. (2) Archaeology suggests that the traditional site of the upper room (the Cenacle) lies within the Essene quarter of ancient Jerusalem. Thus, the probable location of the Last Supper on the southwest hill of the city is precisely where archeologists have uncovered the remains of an Essene settlement from the first century. If the identification holds, this would tighten the possible connection between Jesus, the Last Supper, and the Essene solar calendar. (3) The hypothesis that Jesus celebrated the Last Supper on Tuesday night has an added dimension of historical plausibility: it allows more time for the extensive legal proceedings that transpired between his arrest and condemnation. Recall that Jesus was taken before Annas (Jn 18:13, 19-23), Caiaphas (Jn 18:24), the Sanhedrin (Lk 22:66-71), Herod (Lk 23:6-11), and Pilate (Jn 18:28-40). These trials may have occurred during a single night, but the events fit more comfortably within the span of several days. (4) A Syriac text from the third century explicitly states that Jesus celebrated the Last Supper on Tuesday night (*Didascalia Apostolorum* 5, 12-18), and other ancient writers, such as bishop Victorinus of Pettau (*De Fabrica Mundi* 3) and Saint Epiphanius (*Panarion* 51, 26), state that Jesus was taken into custody on Tuesday night. Recently, Pope Benedict XVI commented that this solution is worthy of consideration ("Homily for the Mass of the Lord's Supper", Holy Thursday, 5 April 2007).

### The Paschal Proposal

Another solution contends that John's Gospel follows the same chronology as the Synoptics when its historical notations are considered more carefully. On this view, Jesus celebrated the Last Supper on Thursday night, along with the rest of Jerusalem, and the notion that John puts Passover on Friday night is simply a misunderstanding of the evangelist's use of Passover terminology. Four considerations may be said to favor this hypothesis. (1) It is important to recognize that the word "Passover", both in Hebrew (*pesah*) and in Greek (*pascha*), has a wider range of meaning than simply "Passover lamb" or "Passover meal". It can also designate the entirety of "Passover week" (Lk 22:1), as well as "the peace offerings sacrificed and eaten during Passover week" (Deut 16:2-3; Mishnah, *Pesahim* 9, 5). In light of this latter usage, one could say that the Jewish authorities in John 18:28 probably fear that defilement will disqualify them from partaking, not of the Passover Seder (held the night before), but of the celebratory sacrifices eaten during Passover week. Peace offerings, after all, could not be eaten in a state of ritual defilement (Lev 7:19-20). (2) The supper that Jesus attends in John 13:2 is the same as the Synoptic Last Supper, in which case it was a Passover meal. This is not stated explicitly, but John's description of the meal highlights features that, taken together, are distinctive of a Passover banquet (e.g., the participants *reclined*, Jn 13:23; morsels were *dipped*, Jn 13:26; some thought Judas was sent with an offering for the poor, Jn 13:29; the meal took place at *night*, Jn 13:30). Thus, the comment that Jesus contemplated his hour "before the feast of the Passover" (Jn 13:1) puts this moment of reflection, not a full day before the paschal celebration began, but on the afternoon of Passover eve, only a short time before the start of the feast. (3) The RSV takes John 19:14 to mean that Jesus was sentenced to death on "the day of Preparation of the Passover". This translation is not impossible, but neither is it preferable. The Greek term rendered "day of Preparation" is simply the common word for "Friday", the day when Jews made preparations for the Sabbath (Mk 15:42; Lk 23:54). Since John himself appears to use the term primarily in relation to the Sabbath (see Jn 19:31, 42), it is likely that the expression in John 19:14 means "Friday of Passover week" and is not meant to identify the afternoon of Good Friday as Passover eve. (4) Christian theologians who have favored this solution include Saint John Chrysostom (*Homilies on John* 83) and Saint Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* III, 46, 9). «