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Was the Last Supper a Passover Meal?



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Was the Last Supper a Passover Meal?

Four Accounts of the Institution of the Eucharist

The institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper is given to us in four parallel accounts that can be grouped in two pairs, which are Matthew and Mark on the one hand, and Luke and St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11, on the other. John does not give us an account of the institution of the Eucharist, but gives us instead the bread of life discourse, and the washing of the feet at the Last Supper, both of which shed light on the Eucharist.

Why does John not give an account of the institution of the Eucharist? The most reasonable explanation is that he is interested in supplementing the Synoptic Gospels by giving accounts of things they have omitted. Hence he adds the Bread of Life discourse and the washing of the feet, but omits the institution narrative already transmitted in four accounts. A second possible complementary reason is that John was writing later, at which time it was prudent to maintain a veil of secrecy over the most sacred heart of Christian worship. This practice, known as the *disciplina arcani*, was very common in the early Church. Joachim Jeremias writes: “All difficulties disappear, however, with the realization that the fourth evangelist consciously omitted the account of the Lord’s Supper *because he did not want to reveal the sacred formula to the general public.*”¹

The tendency to cover the most sacred things behind an allusive veil seems to have led St. John to speak about the Eucharist through the image of the washing of the feet of the disciples rather than giving a direct account of the institution of the Eucharist. All that is said about the washing of the feet could also be said about the Eucharist.² The *disciplina arcani* also seems to be behind the practice of the early Church of reciting the words of consecration *sotto voce*, which covers the sacred words with a veil of silence.

All four of our institution narratives are relatively early. In his first letter to the Corinthians, dated at about AD 53–57, Paul recounts what he passed on to the Corinthians when he first evangelized them around the year 51.³ He also mentions that what he passed on to them is what he himself received,⁴ presumably before he arrived in Antioch in 40–42, and perhaps even years before. The origin of

his account therefore goes back to the first decade after the Crucifixion.

The other accounts were written at roughly the same time as 1 Corinthians. The early tradition of the Church assigns the first place to St. Matthew.⁵ This makes sense because Matthew gives us the account closest to the Jewish mentality, and clearly directed to a Jewish audience. Mark and Luke may be writing toward the end of the 50’s or early 60’s.⁶ Mark is said to depend principally on Peter, and Luke principally on Paul.⁷ Although they differ in some details, the essential nucleus is the same in all four accounts. The liturgical practice of the Church has been to consider the various accounts as forming a whole, and to present together the different aspects each sacred writer has highlighted. The three accounts are as follows.

Matthew 26:17–30

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples

5 See the decree of the Pontifical Biblical Commission of June 19, 1911 (AAS 3 [1911] 294ff; EB 401ff; DS 3561ff, D2148ff), §2: “Should the verdict of tradition be considered to give adequate support to the statement that Matthew wrote before the other Evangelists and wrote the first Gospel in the native language then used by the Jews of Palestine for whom the work was intended? Answer: In the affirmative to both parts.”

6 See the decree of the Pontifical Biblical Commission of June 26, 1912 (AAS 4 [1912] 463ff; EB 408ff; DS 3568ff, D2155ff). With regard to Luke, §7 states: “Should it be affirmed that the Gospel of Luke preceded the Acts of the Apostles; and as this book, written by the same Luke (Acts 1:1f), was finished at the close of the Apostle’s imprisonment at Rome (Acts 28:30f), that his Gospel was not composed after this time? Answer: In the affirmative.”

7 Mark’s dependence on Peter is asserted in our earliest source on the Gospels, which is a fragment of a work by Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in the first third of the second century, quoted by Eusebius in his *History of the Church* 3.39, trans. G. A. Williamson (New York: Dorset Press, 1965), 152: “This, too, the presbyter [John] used to say. ‘Mark, who had been Peter’s interpreter, wrote down carefully, but not in order, all that he remembered of the Lord’s sayings and doings. For he had not heard the Lord or been one of His followers, but later, as I said, one of Peter’s. Peter used to adapt his teaching to the occasion, without making a systematic arrangement of the Lord’s sayings, so that Mark was quite justified in writing down some things just as he remembered them. For he had one purpose only — to leave out nothing that he had heard, and to make no misstatement about it.’”

See also the decree of the Pontifical Biblical Commission of June 26, 1912, §8: “In view both of the witness of tradition and the internal evidence concerning the sources used by each Evangelist in writing his Gospel, is it prudent to doubt the opinion that Mark wrote in accordance with the preaching of Peter and Luke in accordance with that of Paul, and also that these Evangelists had, besides, other trustworthy sources, whether oral or written? Answer: In the negative.”

1 Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1973), 125 (italics original).

2 See Anthony A. La Femina, *Eucharist and Covenant in John’s Last Supper Account* (New Hope, KY: New Hope Publications, 2011).

3 1 Cor 11:20-34. See *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: New Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 283.

4 As recounted in Acts 11:25-26.

came to Jesus, saying, “Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the passover?” He said, “Go into the city to a certain one, and say to him, ‘The Teacher says, My time is at hand; I will keep the passover at your house with my disciples.’” And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the passover. When it was evening, he sat at table with the twelve disciples; and as they were eating, he said, “Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.” And they were very sorrowful, and began to say to him one after another, “Is it I, Lord?” He answered, “He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me, will betray me. The Son of man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.” Judas, who betrayed him, said, “Is it I, Master?” He said to him, “You have said so.” Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.” And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Mark 14:12–26

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?” And he sent two of his disciples, and said to them, “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the householder, ‘The Teacher says, “Where is my guest room, where I am to eat the passover with my disciples?”’ And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there prepare for us.” And the disciples set out and went to the city, and found it as he had told them; and they prepared the passover. And when it was evening he came with the twelve. And as they were at table eating, Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.” They began to be sorrowful, and to say to him one after another, “Is it I?” He said to them, “It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with me. For the Son of man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.” And as they were eating, he took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Luke 22:7–30

Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the passover lamb had to be sacrificed. So Jesus sent Peter and

John, saying, “Go and prepare the passover for us, that we may eat it.” They said to him, “Where will you have us prepare it?” He said to them, “Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house which he enters, and tell the householder, ‘The Teacher says to you, Where is the guest room, where I am to eat the passover with my disciples?’ And he will show you a large upper room furnished; there make ready.” And they went, and found it as he had told them; and they prepared the passover. And when the hour came, he sat at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, “I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you I shall not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, “Take this, and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And likewise the cup after supper, saying, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But behold the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. For the Son of man goes as it has been determined; but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!” And they began to question one another, which of them it was that would do this. A dispute also arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves. “You are those who have continued with me in my trials; and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Luke’s Account and the Passover Seder

St. Luke gives us more details about the Last Supper which enable us to situate the institution of the Eucharist within the structure of the Passover *seder*. Unlike the other Evangelists, St. Luke mentions two chalices: one before the institution of the Eucharist, and then another at the end of the supper, in which the wine becomes His precious Blood. This detail, which may seem confusing at first sight, corresponds to the structure of the Passover *seder*, at which four cups of red wine are drunk.⁸

The general form of the Passover *seder* as practiced today is quite ancient and seems to go back to the time before the destruction of the Temple.⁹ The first cup (*kiddush*) is drunk at the beginning of the *seder*, after the blessing: “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe,

⁸ See Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 52.

⁹ See the discussion in Frédéric Manns, *Jewish Prayer in the Time of Jesus* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1994), 184–211.

who creates the fruit of the vine.”¹⁰ The second cup is then mixed but not yet drunk. The youngest child asks his father why this night is different from all other nights. The father explains by telling the story of Exodus and interpreting it, which would include the explanation of the paschal lamb and why unleavened bread and bitter herbs are eaten. Afterwards the second cup is drunk. Then there is a blessing over the matzah, and a piece of it is consumed. There follows the dinner, at the end of which a third cup of wine is drunk while reciting the blessing of thanksgiving after the meal. This cup is known as the cup of blessing (*berakah*). Then psalms 115–118 (Hallel) are recited,¹¹ after which the fourth cup of wine is drunk. Psalms 116 and 118 are messianic psalms, and Psalm 116:12–17 is particularly appropriate to the occasion of the institution of the Eucharist:

What shall I render to the Lord for all his bounty to me?
I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord,

I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people.

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.
I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the Lord.

The first chalice mentioned by Luke corresponds to the (first or) second cup of the *seder*. The cup which Jesus used to become His Blood is the third cup, after the *matzah* and the meal, as Luke specifies.¹²

Date of the Last Supper

All four accounts agree that Jesus died on Friday.¹³ They also agree that the Eucharist was instituted the night before He died, at the Last Supper, which is still the same date as Friday in the Jewish calendar, because in the Jewish reckoning of time each new calendar day begins at sunset (as in Gen 1). However, we are not sure of the date of Friday. Thursday night could have been the first night of the Passover, the 15th of Nissan (see Ex 12:1-8), or some say it could have been the 14th of Nissan. This is important because the paschal lambs were sacrificed in the afternoon of the 14th of Nissan, and the feast of the Passover was celebrated that night after sunset, which would be the 15th of Nissan.¹⁴ This question has deep typological significance, because the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper

10 See Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist: Unlocking the Secrets of the Last Supper* (New York: Doubleday Religion, 2011), 152.

11 Mt 26:30 and Mk 14:26 probably allude to the recitation of the hallel psalms. See Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 55.

12 See Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy to the Time of Gregory the Great*, trans. Francis A. Brunner (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1959), 32.

13 See Mt 27:62; Mk 15:42; Lk 23:54; John 19:31.

14 See the masterful treatment of this question by Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Last Supper* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015), 251–373.

and the Passion of Christ are the fulfillment of the typological figures of the Passover seder and the sacrifice of the paschal lamb. Did Jesus choose to institute the Eucharist and offer Himself in sacrifice on the first day of Passover? Or did He choose to do that on the 14th of Nissan, when the paschal lamb was slaughtered in the Temple?

The Synoptic gospels all state that the Last Supper was a Passover meal, and Luke similarly states that it was the first day of unleavened bread.¹⁵ Mark 14:12 states that the Last Supper was in the evening after the Passover lamb was sacrificed. The Last Supper would thus take place after sunset at the beginning of the 15th of Nissan. Luke begins his account of the Supper with the words of Jesus: “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.”¹⁶ The expression, to “eat the Passover,” implies the eating of the Passover lamb, which is referred to by the same word *πάσχα*.¹⁷

Although John does not give an account of the institution of the Eucharist, the meal described in John 13 seems to be a Passover meal,¹⁸ as can be seen from various details such as the solemnity of the meal, the fact that the participants reclined,¹⁹ the fact that it was night (for the Passover had to be celebrated after sundown),²⁰ and the dipping of the morsel (Jn 13:26), which seems to refer to the custom at the Passover *seder* to dip the bitter herbs into a mixture of nuts, apples, and wine, called *haroset*.²¹

Despite these elements that suggest a Passover meal, John’s account, however, has other features that have led many to think that John implies that the Last Supper could not properly be a Passover meal, but is situated one evening earlier, after sunset on the 14th of Nissan, before the Passover lambs would be sacrificed the following afternoon. This way Jesus’s death would occur at roughly the same time as the sacrifice of the paschal lambs in the Temple. There are several reasons for holding this position.

First, John 18:28 suggests that the Jewish authorities were to eat the Passover on the evening after the Crucifixion (Friday evening), for it states: “Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the praetorium. It was early. They themselves did not enter the praetorium, so that they

15 See Lk 22:1. The Synoptics state that the Last Supper is a Passover meal in Mt 26:17–19; Mk 14:12, 14, 16; Lk 22:7, 8, 11, 13, 15. See Pitre, *Jesus and the Last Supper*, 315–316; Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 41–62.

16 Lk 22:15.

17 Lk 22:6 and Lk 22:15; see also Mk 14:12. See Pitre, *Jesus and the Last Supper*, 291.

18 See Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1973), 16–84.

19 Reclining during the Passover meal was a ritual duty, reminding the participants of the freedom won by the Exodus. See Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 49.

20 Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 46.

21 See Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Last Supper*, 346–347; *The Ignatius Bible*, commentary on John 13, p. 188.

might not be defiled, but *might eat the Passover.*” A second reason for thinking that John’s account is incompatible with the Last Supper being a Passover meal is suggested by John 19:14, which says that the time of the crucifixion was the sixth hour on the “day of Preparation of the Passover.” A third argument, which also applies to the Synoptic accounts, is that it seems that it would be impossible for the Sanhedrin to convene for Jesus’ trial if the feast of Passover had already begun.

There are four principal ways of dealing with the apparent conflict in the Gospels over the date of the Last Supper, and whether or not it was a proper Passover meal.²² One way holds that the Last Supper was truly a Passover meal, and seeks to reconcile the apparently divergent elements in John’s gospel with this hypothesis.²³ I will refer to this, following Brant Pitre, as the *Passover hypothesis*.

The second way to interpret the date of the Last Supper is to hold that only John’s account is historically accurate, and that the Last Supper was held on the night of the 14th of Nissan, before the sacrifice of the paschal lambs in the afternoon of the 14th of Nissan. This can be referred to as the *Johannine hypothesis*, which holds that the Last Supper was either not a true Passover, or that Jesus anticipated the Passover by one day. This view seems to be implicit in the Eastern practice of celebrating the Mass with leavened bread. The great difficulty here is how to reconcile this with the clear words of the Synoptic Gospels that the Last Supper was on the feast of the Passover.²⁴

A third option (referred to by Pitre as the *Synoptic hypothesis*) is diametrically opposed to the Johannine hypothesis, for while it favors the chronology of the Synoptic Gospels, it proposes that John deliberately departed from the actual historical chronology for a symbolic purpose. According to this view, John chose to portray Jesus’s death as coinciding with the time of the sacrifice of the paschal lambs in the Temple on the 14th of Nissan, even though He actually was crucified on the following day in historical reality. The problem with this view is similar to that of the Johannine hypothesis. It does not sufficiently respect the inerrancy of Scripture and John’s intention to relate the historical fact in his presentation of its providential symbolism.²⁵

A fourth way of reconciling the accounts is the hypothesis that Jesus celebrated a true Passover, but according to a different calendar than the one used by the Temple authorities. Thus the sacrifice of the paschal lambs would have

22 Pitre outlines the four positions in *Jesus and the Last Supper*, 258–259. See also Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1973), 20–26; *The Ignatius Bible*, commentary on John 13, p. 188.

23 See Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 20–21.

24 Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 21. See Pitre’s discussion of this hypothesis in *Jesus and the Last Supper*, 281–313.

25 See Pitre’s summary and criticism of this position in *Jesus and the Last Supper*, 314–330.

coincided with Jesus’ death on the Cross, and the official Passover meal would have taken place on Friday night, after Jesus’ death.

Passover Hypothesis

The first position is the most traditional, and is defended by St. Jerome, St. Augustine, and St. John Chrysostom at the end of the fourth century, and by St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas claims that the phrase “eat the passover” refers not only to the eating of the lamb, but also of the unleavened bread, which is done throughout the eight-day celebration, and requires ritual purity. In his commentary on John 18:28, he writes:

A problem arises about the first point: that they would not enter the praetorium so as not to be defiled. The other Evangelists say that Christ was seized in the evening, on the day of the supper; and this would be the passover meal: “I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you” (Lk 22:15). And then in the morning of the next day he was brought to the praetorium. Why then do we read so that they might eat the passover, since it was the day after the passover? Some of the modern Greeks say that we are now on the fourteenth lunar day of the month, and that Christ was crucified on the day the Jews celebrated the passover, but that Christ anticipated the passover by one day, since he knew he would be killed on the day of the Jewish passover. Thus, he celebrated the passover on the thirteenth lunar day, in the evening. And since the law commanded that the Jews should not have leavened bread from the fourteenth day of the first month to the twenty-first day, they say that Christ consecrated leavened bread.

This is not acceptable for two reasons. First, the Old Testament has no instance where anyone was permitted to anticipate the celebration of the passover. But if one was prevented, he could postpone it to the next month: “If any man of you or of your descendants is unclean . . . he shall still keep the passover to the Lord. In the second month on the fourteenth day in the evening they shall keep it” (Num 9:10). And since Christ never omitted any observance of the law, it is not true to say that he anticipated the passover. Secondly, Mark (14:12) states explicitly that Christ came on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the passover lamb; and Matthew says that “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?’” (Mt 26:17). So, we should not say that Christ anticipated the passover. . . .

Therefore we should say with Jerome, Augustine²⁶ and other Latin Fathers, that the fourteenth day is the beginning of the feast; but the passover refers not just to that evening, but to the entire time of the seven days during which they ate unleavened bread, which was to be eaten by those who were clean. And because the Jews would have contracted uncleanness by entering the residence of a foreign judge, they did not enter so that they might not be defiled, but might eat

26 Augustine, *Tract. in Io.*, 114, ch. 1, col. 1936; cf. *Catena Aurea*, 18:28–32.

the passover, that is, the unleavened bread.²⁷

Alternatively, this reference to the Jewish leaders not wanting to enter the praetorium (which would make them ritually impure) so that they could eat the Passover, is perhaps better explained by the fact that peace offerings were sacrificed and consumed on each night of the week of Passover, and this also required ritual purity.²⁸ Indeed, Deuteronomy 16:2–3 commands the Israelites to “eat the Passover” for *seven* days:

And you shall offer the passover sacrifice to the Lord your God, from the flock or the herd, at the place which the Lord will choose, to make his name dwell there. You shall eat no leavened bread with it; *seven days you shall eat it with unleavened bread.*

With regard to John 19:14, the expression, “day of preparation of the Passover,” can be read in two ways. It could mean the eve of the feast of Passover, which is the day of the 14th of Nissan. “Day of preparation,” however, is the normal Jewish way of referring to Friday, the day of preparation for the Sabbath that begins after sundown on Friday. Thus the “day of preparation of the Passover” would most naturally designate the Friday within Passover week, even if that evening was not the first day of Passover.

With regard to the argument that a trial and execution could not occur during the feast of the Passover, it should be pointed out that Jewish law, as later recorded in the *Tosefta*, required false prophets to be executed precisely during a pilgrim feast such as Passover so that the many pilgrims to Jerusalem would witness it:

A rebellious and incorrigible son, a defiant elder, one who leads people astray to worship idols, one who leads a town to apostasy, a false prophet, and perjured witnesses—they do not kill them immediately. But they bring them up to the court in Jerusalem and keep them until the festival, and then they put them to death on the festival, as it is said, “And all the peoples shall hear and fear, and no more do presumptuously” (Deut 17:13). The words of Rabbi Aquiba.²⁹

This seems to be an exact description of the motivation for choosing the first day of Passover, 15th of Nissan, for the execution of Jesus.

Essene Hypothesis

As mentioned above, a third attempt at reconciling the accounts is the hypothesis that Jesus celebrated a true Passover, but according to a different calendar. This hypothesis

²⁷ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, part II, trans. James A. Weisheipl and Fabian R. Larcher (Petersham, MA: St. Bede’s Publications, n.d.), 538–539. See also the parallel text in *ST III*, q. 46, a. 9, ad 1.

²⁸ See Pitre, *Jesus and the Last Supper*, 352–356, who cites several rabbinical texts in which the term “Passover” (*pesah*) refers to the Passover peace offerings offered and eaten on each day of the festival.

²⁹ *Tosefta*, Sanhedrin 11:7, trans. Jacob Neusner, *The Tosefta* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), cited in Pitre, *Jesus and the Last Supper*, 303.

has been proposed in three different forms. One version of this hypothesis supposes a difference between the calendar of the Sadducees and the Pharisees. According to this proposal, Jesus would have celebrated the Passover according to the calendar of the Pharisees on Thursday evening, together with the majority of the people. The Sadducees, however, would have celebrated the feast a day later, on Friday evening. This would explain the difficulty posed by John 18:28, according to which those who led Jesus to the Praetorium did not enter, “so that they might not be defiled, but might eat the Passover.” The High Priest and his family belonged to the sect of the Sadducees.³⁰

A second proposal is that the Passover was celebrated on two successive evenings due to the logistical difficulty of sacrificing the great number of lambs that needed to be sacrificed in the afternoon of the 14th of Nissan. It has been proposed that the pilgrims from Galilee were assigned the preceding day (the 13th of Nissan) for the sacrifice.³¹

Another more recent proposal is that the divergence of calendar was between the Essenes and the Temple cult. We know that the Essenes maintained a different liturgical calendar regulated by a solar year rather than a lunar year. In this solar calendar, feast days always occurred on the same day of the week, and thus the Essene Passover occurred on a Tuesday evening. Annie Jaubert proposes that Jesus celebrated the Passover according to the Essene calendar.³² According to this hypothesis, Jesus was captured and imprisoned on Tuesday night at Gethsemane. The various trials recounted in the Gospels, according to Jaubert’s thesis, would have been spread out over the following two days, ending finally on Friday with Pilate’s order to crucify Him.³³

By celebrating the Passover before the official date, it would have been possible for Jesus to combine two crucial aspects of symbolism. He could institute the Eucharist in the context of a Passover meal; and He could be sacrificed when the paschal lambs were, according to this theory, being sacrificed, which would more clearly show Him to be the true Lamb of God, represented typologically by all the paschal lambs.

Pope Benedict speaks about this problem in his homily of Holy Thursday on April 5, 2007. He prefers the solution—

³⁰ See Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 23–24, who summarizes this position and comments: “This theory has been so thoroughly and carefully argued, especially by Billerbeck, that its possibility has to be admitted. Its weakness is that it is wholly conjectural; there is no evidence that the Passover lambs were ever slaughtered on two consecutive days in the Temple.”

³¹ See J. Pickl, *Messiaskönig Jesus* (Munich, 1935), 247–248. But see Jeremias’ comment in *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 24: “There is therefore no evidence for Pickl’s thesis; it, too, remains pure conjecture.”

³² Annie Jaubert, *The Date of the Last Supper* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1965).

³³ *Ibid.*, 103–117.

said to be a “highly plausible hypothesis”—that Jesus celebrated the Passover according to the Essene calendar, in which it fell at least one day earlier. Thus Jesus would have celebrated the Last Supper on the Essene Passover, in which He Himself was the Temple and the Lamb that was offered; and He would be crucified on Friday, the “day of preparation” in which according to this theory the paschal lambs were sacrificed in the Temple.

There is an apparent discrepancy in the Evangelists’ accounts, between John’s Gospel on the one hand, and what on the other Mathew, Mark and Luke tell us.

According to John, Jesus died on the Cross at the very moment when the Passover lambs were being sacrificed in the temple. The death of Jesus and the sacrifice of the lambs coincided. However, this means that he must have died the day before Easter [Passover] and could not, therefore, have celebrated the Passover meal in person - this, at any rate, is how it appears.

According to the three Synoptic Gospels, the Last Supper of Jesus was instead a Passover meal into whose traditional form he integrated the innovation of the gift of his Body and Blood.

This contradiction seemed unsolvable until a few years ago. The majority of exegetes were of the opinion that John was reluctant to tell us the true historical date of Jesus’ death, but rather chose a symbolic date to highlight the deeper truth: Jesus is the new, true Lamb who poured out his Blood for us all.

In the meantime, the discovery of the [Dead Sea] Scrolls at Qumran has led us to a possible and convincing solution which, although it is not yet accepted by everyone, is a highly plausible hypothesis. We can now say that John’s account is historically precise.

Jesus truly shed his blood on the eve of Easter at the time of the immolation of the lambs. In all likelihood, however, he celebrated the Passover with his disciples in accordance with the Qumran calendar, hence, at least one day earlier; he celebrated it without a lamb, like the Qumran community which did not recognize Herod’s temple and was waiting for the new temple.

Consequently, Jesus celebrated the Passover without a lamb - no, not without a lamb: instead of the lamb he gave himself, his Body and his Blood. Thus, he anticipated his death in a manner consistent with his words: “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (Jn 10: 18).

At the time when he offered his Body and his Blood to the disciples, he was truly fulfilling this affirmation. He himself offered his own life. Only in this way did the ancient Passover acquire its true meaning. . . . Jesus celebrated the Passover without a lamb and without a temple; yet, not without a lamb and not without a temple. He himself was the awaited Lamb, the true Lamb, just as John the Baptist had foretold at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn 1: 29).

And he himself was the true Temple, the living Temple where God dwells and where we can encounter God and worship him. His Blood, the love of the One who is both Son of God and true man, one of us, is the Blood that can save. His love, that love in which he gave himself freely for us, is what saves us. The nostalgic, in a certain sense, ineffectual gesture which was the sacrifice of an innocent and perfect lamb, found a response in the One who for our sake became at the same time Lamb and Temple.³⁴

The Essene hypothesis, however, although attractive, remains largely unsubstantiated and hypothetical.³⁵ The biggest problem with it is that it contradicts the clear statement of Mark 14:12 and Luke 22:7–8 that the Last Supper took place in the evening after the afternoon in which the paschal lambs were sacrificed. Supporters of the Essene hypothesis have to discount these texts as later interpolations.³⁶ A second problem is that the Essene hypothesis requires a period of three days between the Last Supper and the crucifixion, and the four Gospels all present the crucifixion as occurring the day after the Last Supper.³⁷ Third, there is no evidence that Jesus ever deviated from the Temple calendar.³⁸

The best solution, it seems, remains the first, which is the most traditional, despite the difficulties.³⁹ We should think that Jesus celebrated the Last Supper on the night in which all Israel ate the Passover lamb.

34 Accessed at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20070405_coena-domini.html. See also the treatment of this theme in Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth. Part Two. Holy Week from the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 106–116.

35 See the explanation of the problems associated with the Essene hypothesis by Brant Pitre in *Jesus and the Last Supper*, 268–280.

36 See Jaubert, *The Date of the Last Supper*, 97–98.

37 See Pitre, *Jesus and the Last Supper*, 272–273.

38 See John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1: *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 393; Pitre, *Jesus and the Last Supper*, 270–271.

39 This is the conclusion of Brant Pitre in *Jesus and the Last Supper*, 331–373.