

Introduction

The Gospel of John has been troublesome for those seeking to understand the life of Christ. Unique in its literary style and content, the Gospel differs greatly from the Synoptic Gospels. These differences have raised many questions in the minds of scholars and lay people alike concerning the validity of both John and the Synoptic Gospels, since many of these differences are alleged contradictions in the account of the life of Christ. One such contradiction concerns the day of Christ's crucifixion in relation to the last meal he had with his disciples, the Passover meal.

The Problem

According to some scholars, John's Gospel places Christ's crucifixion before the Passover meal.¹ The reason for this placement stems from such verses as John 18:28 and 19:14. In John 18:28, Christ is said to have been put on trial before Pilate on a day when the Jewish crowd would not enter because they did not want to defile themselves, for the purpose of remaining ceremonially clean that they "might eat the Passover." From this, the chronology of events seems rather clear: Christ began his trials leading up to his crucifixion before the Jewish Passover meal. John 19:14 further reinforces this by noting that Pilate's verdict sending Christ to be crucified fell on the "day of preparation for the Passover." Here, the "day of *preparation* for the Passover" seems to state clearly that Christ was sentenced to death before the Passover, on the day when preparations were made for the Passover. Both of these verses from John's Gospel seem to clearly suggest that Christ was crucified before the Passover meal. However, the Synoptic Gospels clearly locate Christ's crucifixion as occurring after the Passover Meal (i.e. Mark 14:12).

¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 50.

The Current Focus

While various approaches have been taken to harmonize this contradiction,² the current study will focus on two areas. First, the phrases concerning the Passover in John 18:28 and 19:14 will be carefully analyzed to assess what John was describing. Second, a brief consideration of the possible use of two different calendars in the writings of John and the Synoptic authors will be given. Taking both of these areas of focus into consideration, a substantial conclusion will be drawn defending the unity of John's account with the rest of the Synoptics concerning the crucifixion of Christ in relation to the Passover meal.

The Biblical Text

John 18:28- "Passover"

The first phrase under scrutiny is found in John 18:28. Here, as noted earlier, the Jews are portrayed as not wanting to enter into Pilate's courtyard because of a desire not to be defiled for the "Passover" (*pascha*). Again, the issue is if Christ is already being tried before the Passover meal in John's gospel, then the meal He ate before the trial was not a Passover meal, as the Synoptics purport it to be. Evangelical scholars have attempted to place this event after the actual Passover meal by noting that the word *pascha* can refer to the weeklong festival of Passover, in which the Passover meal is the first event of the week. Lewis Foster notes that the word "Passover" can mean 1) the lamb, 2) the actual Passover feast, or 3) the week of celebration. If this is the case, Foster argues, then the demands of the Jews to Pilate could have referred to "a feast later in the

² For a recent summary, see Darrell L. Block in *Luke, Vol. 2, 9:51-24:53* in *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, Moises Silva, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 1953-1960.

Passover Week, such as the *chagigah*.”³ Thus John could have had Christ eat the Passover meal for the Last Supper, and was crucified after the Passover meal.

Of course, not all scholars agree. Robert H. Stein confronts those like Foster by arguing that if the author intended to refer to the *chagigah*, then that word would have been used in the original text by the author. Using this as a starting point for his argument, Stein adds on to his case by noting that the original readers would have understood the term *pascha* as a reference to the meal itself.⁴ Other scholars do not even try to reconcile John and the Synoptic writers by trying to uncover the meaning of *pascha*. Rather, they see the difference between the Gospels as a calendar issue (as discussed below).⁵

However, the evidence suggests that an understanding of *pascha* as a reference to the week long festival is favorable. Walter Bauer’s *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, regarded as the modern authority of the Greek Language of this time period, notes that the “popular usage [of *pascha*] merged the two festivals [the Passover meal and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which was a week long] and treated them as a unity, as they were for practical purposes.”⁶ Stein himself notes that the possibility of *pascha* being used in reference to the weeklong event is

³ Lewis Foster, “The Chronology of the New Testament,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gaebelin, vol 1(Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 599.

⁴ Robert H. Stein, *Difficult Passages in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 64.

⁵ Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977), 81, 87.

⁶ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and ed. By William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2d rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 633.

probable by noting other instances in Scripture where the word is specifically used in that way (e.g.- 2 Chronicles 30:22).⁷

The best exegetical understanding of John's usage of *pascha*, though, must be derived from the immediate context. Craig Blomberg notes that the situation in John 18:28 occurred during the daylight hours of that day. As such, he argues that a defilement incurring at this time of day would "expire at sundown and would not prevent their [the Jews'] celebration of an evening dinner," the Passover meal being an evening dinner.⁸ Thus, the complaint of defilement would be unnecessary if a Passover-meal understanding of *pascha* was in their minds. More probable would be the usage of *pascha* in reference to the *chagigah*, which was a midday meal, since the defilement would definitely be in effect for that meal, held the next day after the Passover meal.⁹ Thus, the meal associated with the word "Passover" in John 18:28 is best seen as a meal in the weeklong festival and not as the Passover meal itself.

John 19:14- "The Day of Preparation for the Passover"

The second phrase under scrutiny is found in John 19:14 where Pilate's sentence of Christ's crucifixion is said to have occurred "the day of preparation before the Passover." As noted in the introduction, some scholars use this to support a pre-Passover crucifixion and a Last Supper that was not a Passover meal. Upon the first read, this seems like the case.

However, a careful analysis of the term "preparation" and its usage sheds some light into what John is trying to convey in this passage. Blomberg notes that the Greek

⁷ Stein, 63.

⁸ Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1987), 177.

⁹ Ibid.

word *paraskeue* translated “day of preparation” was used and still is used as the standard term for Friday in the Greek language.¹⁰ Foster notes this as well, citing Josephus’ *Antiquities* (16.6.2) usage of the word “preparation” being the usual word for Friday.¹¹ Thus, translating *paraskeue* as “Friday,” a literal translation of the phrase in John 19:14 would be “Friday of Passover (*pascha*).” Blomberg and Morris both understand this phrase to mean simply “Friday in Passover week.”¹² In the light of the previous discussion of *pascha* and the current discussion of “the day of preparation,” it can be confidently asserted that John’s Gospel is in harmony with the Synoptic Gospels in its placement of the crucifixion of Christ after the Passover meal.

The Calendar Theory

While the argument so far has been focused on word usage and meaning during the time of Christ, the calendar theory argument concerns itself with the development and usage of dates in the first century. While this argument is quite complex and diverse, it can be summed up in the following: the Synoptics use a calendar that was different from the calendar used by John. This argument has been employed much by those who hold the view that John’s Gospel was written with a desire to portray Christ as the “Lamb that was slain” (e.g. John 1:36). From this, they argue that John wanted to have Jesus crucified and killed at the exact moment when the lambs for the Passover meal were being slain, thus fulfilling the imagery of Jesus being the “Lamb that was slain” (Rev. 5:12). Thus, John employed a different calendar in order to have Christ crucified at that

¹⁰ Ibid., 177-178.

¹¹ Lewis, 599.

¹²Blomberg, 178. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John in The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. FF Bruce (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 776.

time. While some purport that the evidence for this thematic overtone in John is weak¹³ this study is nevertheless profitable, producing a viable alternative to the harmonization of John and the Synoptics, especially if some see the previous argument as not convincing.

The more widely accepted and viable view of how this usage of two calendars arose seems to be the one proposed by Billerbeck.¹⁴ His theory is that the Sadducees and Pharisees used different calendars because a difference in understanding the date of the Pentecost as mentioned in Lev. 23:15, which commanded the nation of Israel to hold the Pentecost celebration seven full weeks “from the day after the Sabbath.” The Pharisees understood the day after the Sabbath as the day after Passover, while the Sadducees understood it as the day after the Sabbath (Sunday). Apparently, this was due to the Sadducees desire for the Pentecost to fall on a Sunday. Because of this, the calendars between the Sadducees and Pharisees were different by one day. Thus, the Pharisees celebrated Passover earlier while the Sadducees celebrated Passover later.¹⁵ With this in mind, Jesus could have eaten the Passover meal and died the next day according to the Pharisaic calendar (and Synoptics) while at the same time dying before the actual Passover meal according to the Sadducees’ calendar (and John’s Gospel).

¹³ See Douglas Moo, *The Old Testament in the Gospel Passion Narratives* (Sheffield, England: The Almond Press, 1983) 323-324. Moo notes that this is an implicit argument (Christ being the Passover lamb) that “falls short of proof.” (324) This is important to note because more liberal-critical scholars, such as Ehrman, seem to base much of their argument on this fact (i.e.- Ehrman, 52). Yet Morris sees this inference the “most natural reading” of John Morris, 785) The previous argument concerning the meaning of the word “Passover” seems able to support the implicit metaphor (if there is one) by rendering Christ as being slain during Passover week. However, for proponents who hold strongly to Christ being the actual Passover meal lamb (i.e. crucified right when the lambs were prepared for the Passover meal, etc), the two-calendar theory will be of more use.

¹⁴ Bock, 1960; Morris, 785; Hoehner, 83, to name a few.

¹⁵ As summarized in Block, 1958-1959.

Evidence for this possibility is rather clear in extra-biblical sources from the time. Walter notes that evidence for the usage of two calendars existed in the Book of Jubilee and in Enoch.¹⁶ Morris notes that the Talmud discussed the usage of these two calendars as well.¹⁷ Even Blomberg, who does not hold this view, notes that this sort of dispute was quite probable based on the evidence found in writings of later Jewish tradition.¹⁸

However, the difficulties associated with this theory have led some scholars to discount this view. For sure, some practical problems, such as how the Jews could allow for two days of slaughter in society that had such rigid restraints concerning the sacrifice of animals, can be explained.¹⁹ Hoehner notes that it would be possible for the Sadducees, who controlled the temple, to allow for the Pharisees another day of slaughter because the popularity the Pharisees enjoyed that would cause the Sadducees to defer to them their wishes at times.²⁰ While postulations like this are quite possible to validate the theory, the biggest difficulty with the two-calendar hypothesis cannot be explained away. This difficulty, the lack of explicit discussion of this in the records of the Jews during the time of Jesus' life, deals the fatal blow to the theory in the eyes of many scholars.²¹

Conclusion

While scholars today still argue that John and the Synoptic Gospels contain contradictory accounts of Christ's death in relation to the Passover meal, there is much

¹⁶ JA Walter, "The Chronology of Passion Week," *JBL*, 77 (1958): 116.

¹⁷ Morris, 783.

¹⁸ Blomberg, 176. However, Blomberg is quick to note that he does not think it was possible in Jerusalem for Jews to have two consecutive days of slaughter- whoever had power should have set the date, he argues. (176)

¹⁹ Bock, 1959; Blomberg 176.

²⁰ Hoehner, 88.

²¹ Bock, 1959.

evidence that suggests otherwise. Two avenues of harmonization have been analyzed and proven reliable, or at least free from internal contradiction. The first of these is in regards to the usage of the word *pascha*, translated “Passover,” in John 18:28 and 19:24. This word has been understood to refer not to the specific Passover meal, but rather to the Passover festival week in general. The second avenue of harmonization concerns the possibility of there being two calendars in use during Jesus’ day. It has been purported that the Synoptics used the calendar of the Pharisees, putting the Passover meal at an earlier date than the calendar of the Sadducees (which was used by John), thus allowing for Jesus to have a Passover meal in the Synoptics yet be crucified before the Passover in John.

It must be noted before closing that the two avenues of harmonization purported are somewhat contradictory to each other- one cannot exist with the other. Thus, the question of which is “better” must be asked. While some scholars seem fully convinced of one particular view²² and others seem not convinced yet, waiting for more evidence,²³ there are scholars that seem to tend to the conclusion being drawn in this paper.²⁴ Along with the conclusion of Bock, it is purported here that, while the argument for *pascha* as a weeklong festival has better support, the two-calendar view is viable because it is coherent and viable in its own propositions.²⁵ Both arguments fulfill the more general thesis that underlies this paper: that there is no contradiction, as is popularly thought, between John’s Gospel and the Synoptic Gospels.

²² See Blomberg, 177-178 for example.

²³ Morris, 783; Stein, 65.

²⁴ Bock, 1960.

²⁵ Ibid.

