

## **No problem? Addressing Apparent Conflicts in the Biblical Narrative.**

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The same event is sometimes recorded more than once in the Bible. As is to be expected, the two records often differ in detail. Occasionally, however, they seem also to conflict.

The locus classicus is that between [Matthew 12:30](#) / [Luke 11:23](#) ("He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters") and [Mark 9:40](#) / [Luke 9:50](#) ("For he who is not against us [*you*] is for us [*you*]"). Modern New Testament scholarship tends to view these not as separate statements, but rather one statement that has either been preserved in two different forms, or which has been altered by the Gospel writers to present a point of view expressing the needs of the Christian community at the time.

But clearly we should not resort to what is no more than reasoned speculation - there is no direct evidence for either view - unless (at least) there is no other answer.

In his *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>1</sup> called these two sayings "the claim to exclusiveness and the claim to totality". He argued that both are necessary and that "The cross of Christ makes both sayings true." D.A. Carson<sup>2</sup> commented similarly, adding he thought there are two different contexts where Mark 9:40 and Luke 9:50 describe the attitude listeners are to have to other possible disciples: when in doubt, be inclusive, while Matthew 12:30 and Luke 11:23 describe the standard listeners should apply to themselves: be in no doubt of one's own standing. Other commentaries argue that, juxtaposed, the sayings declare the impossibility of neutrality.<sup>3</sup>

Any of these could be correct, but even they tacitly assume that Jesus' sayings were intended as unlimited general truths. If He was indeed setting up universally applicable default situations, then except in one circumstance, you cannot consistently both define the 'fors' and say that all others are 'againsts', and define the 'againsts' and say that all others are 'fors'.

But surely He was not doing that. He was doing no more than address the circumstances before Him. In one case He was dispelling demons by the power of the Spirit and anyone who did not accept that was against Him; in the other a man was acting as the disciples would do in Jesus' name and so not being against was for Jesus. However unorthodox you are, if you give a cup of water in His name, you will get your reward. The general truths He expressed applied only to such circumstances, and as there explained.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ethics*, p.60-61.

<sup>2</sup> *Commentary on Matthew*

<sup>3</sup> McGarvey on Mark 9.40, Johnson on Matthew 12.30 and Brown on Luke 11.23

In the contexts he was addressing and in the sense in which He was making His comments, there were only two categories, those 'for' and those 'against'. Anyone who was not in one category was necessarily in the other. So it does not matter which one you start with. Scholars would be horrified to realise it, but it is by taking a fundamentalist interpretation - understanding Jesus' words literally as stating a general truth and applying them out of context - that they have been led to searching for solutions to a problem which does not exist.

This brief discussion on the Locus classicus of apparent conflicts illustrates the theme of this paper. We read what appears to be a discrepancy or other problem. But if the writers (and contemporary readers) of the books in the Bible found no conflict, the likelihood is that it is only we who, with in this instance the dis-benefit of hindsight, do so. Our task is to resolve what – it may be only because we come late – appears to be a difficulty, not too readily to conclude that the difficulty is real.

In this regard, do we not need to learn from the past? So often strong positions have been adopted in various branches of study only for it later to be shown that they were wrong. Biblical studies are no exception. That Moses wrote the Pentateuch was challenged by some long ago, for example by A.B. Carlstadt<sup>4</sup> in the sixteenth century; one ground of challenge was that writing did not exist in Moses' day, but then tens of thousands of pieces of writing from earlier were discovered. (There were other grounds of challenge, of course, but that is not the point.) Scholars such as Bleek<sup>5</sup> and de Wette<sup>6</sup> queried Luke's authorship of Acts, and the author was thought by some to be an unreliable historian; who ever heard of politarchs at Thessalonica? But then an inscription was found there showing that such officials did exist.

If we cannot find a resolution of an apparent difficulty in the Bible, we should be humble enough to accept that the reason may be not that a difficulty really exists, but only that we have not yet discovered why it is not a real difficulty. In addition, we may have to be patient - we may not always be lucky enough to find a relevant inscription (or whatever).

The apparent conflict over the date of the Last Supper exemplifies this question of approach.

Some scholars have tried to get round the difficulty by supposing that the Synoptics' supper was only a Passover-like meal, what Tom Wright<sup>7</sup> calls a 'quasi-Passover'. The argument is that 'sensing or suspecting' (J.Meier)<sup>8</sup> that He may not be still free by the time of the Passover but wanting to celebrate it with His apostles, Jesus arranged a solemn meal

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<sup>4</sup> On the canon of Scripture

<sup>5</sup> Exposition of the first three Gospels

<sup>6</sup> Einleitung in das Neue Testament

<sup>7</sup> Wright, N.T. Jesus and the Victory of God. P. 438

<sup>8</sup> Meier, John P. A Marginal Jew; Rethinking the Historical Jesus, vol. 1; The Roots of the Problem and the Person. P.399

while it was possible. Sadler<sup>9</sup> argues that Jesus, being 'greater than the law', was able to eat the Passover Supper a day earlier.

Others have concluded that the Synoptic writers were correct and that John was wrong. They base this on the judgement that the last supper was indeed a Passover meal (for example, J. Jeremias<sup>10</sup>). Some such as C.K. Barrett<sup>11</sup> explain John's 'wrongness' on the ground that he was concerned with the theological rather than the chronological. On John 18:28, Coffman<sup>12</sup> says bluntly that there is 'no way' that this could have been the Passover. But it seems clear both that in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), the Passover Supper is the meal which we know as the Last Supper, the one which Jesus ate with his apostles on the evening before His crucifixion, and that John describes what appears to be the same meal - his narrative of a meal continues seamlessly until 17:26 when Our Lord and the apostles go to Gethsemane.

The meals described are the same and the apparent problem is that John elsewhere seems to put the Passover Supper later.

Scholars have felt driven to search further and further afield for resolutions of the problem. A number of 'different calendar theories have been suggested, summarised by Howard Marshall<sup>13</sup>. Morris<sup>14</sup> summed up this approach; different calendars were used. For example, in the 1950s Annie Jaubert<sup>15</sup> argued that, while in the year of Jesus' death the official lunar calendar had Passover begin on a Friday evening, a 364-day year was also used, for instance by the Qumran community, and that Jesus celebrated the Passover on the date given in that calendar, which always had the feast begin on Tuesday evening. Most scholars have not been convinced by these theories.

More recently, Humphreys<sup>16</sup>, who holds that the "Palm Sunday" entry of Jesus into Jerusalem occurred on Monday, not Sunday, argued that the Last Supper took place on the evening of Wednesday 1 April 33. If the Last Supper was on Tuesday (Jaubert) or Wednesday (Humphreys), this would allow more time than in the traditional view (Last Supper on Thursday) for interrogation of Jesus and His presentation to Pilate before he was crucified on Friday.

Professor Colin Humphrey's book 'The Mystery of the Last Supper' (a model of clarity of explanation) also gives insights into a number of relevant matters on the way. He presents his own fresh account of how this and other apparent inconsistencies could be explained. To this end, he draws on evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls and Egyptian texts, and also uses astronomy to reconstruct ancient calendars. By reconstructing the official

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<sup>9</sup> The Gospel of Matthew. P 400

<sup>10</sup> The Eucharistic Words of Jesus

<sup>11</sup> The Gospel according to John. P 141

<sup>12</sup> Commentary on John, P 428

<sup>13</sup> Last Supper and Lord's Supper

<sup>14</sup> The Gospel according to John. p 785

<sup>15</sup> The Date of the Supper

<sup>16</sup> The Mystery of the Last Supper

Jewish calendar at the time of Christ he claims to show that Jesus was crucified at the same time as the Passover lambs were slain (before the official Passover meal) as he claims is described by John. He then claims that , by using an earlier pre-exilic Jewish calendar, Jesus chose to hold his Last Supper as a real Passover meal as described by the Synoptics.

His theory - that the Last Supper took place on a Wednesday, rather than Thursday as generally believed - unifies 'the supposedly contradictory Gospel stories'. That is, he accepts that John gives a different date to that of the Synoptics. What he then does is to square the circle by explaining why in his view that is nonetheless not a contradiction.

All these approaches assume that there is a problem to be solved. But is there? Is there really a conflict between the days of the Passover meal given by John and by the Synoptics?

Before we consider what John wrote, let us take a step back. It is often advisable - but often forgotten? - to look at the wood before we get too immersed in the trees. Scholars agree that John's Gospel was written some time later than the Synoptics. Now before that, the gospel had been preached thousands of times by the apostles and the ministers under them. The first question we have to ask is: Is it likely that there would have been a difference in the preaching over the date of the Passover Supper? Or that John would have given a different date in his Gospel from that in the already existing written Gospels? Before we continue, we have to stop, it is suggested, and seriously consider those questions.

It is true that some scholars conclude from internal evidence that John had not seen the Synoptic Gospels; Dean Alford<sup>17</sup> wrote in his note on Matthew 17 in his Greek Testament Commentary, that "it is inconceivable that one writing for the purpose avowed in John 20.31 could have found the three accounts as we have them and have made no more allusion to the discrepancy". But that is because he concluded that "none of the various solutions attempted" i.e. to the apparent discrepancy "satisfy me, and at present I have none of my own". But the alternative conclusion to be drawn from the otherwise comment-worthy absence of any allusion by John to a discrepancy is, as this article argues, that there is no real discrepancy. If there was no real discrepancy, there was nothing for John to say.

And even if John had not seen any of the written Gospels - and we really don't know whether he had or not -, the evangelists were all preaching the same Gospel orally. The questions above still arise.

But go back earlier still. All the apostles were at the Last Supper. It is beyond belief that they did not know whether or not the meal they were having was or was not the Passover Supper, and very unlikely that any uncertainty about the matter would have arisen later (whether or not it was the apostle John who was the author of John's Gospel). Even if the full application of the Passover lamb to Jesus (1 Corinthians 5.7) was not brought out until later, the Supper was a key event. There really cannot have been any doubt about either what it was or when it occurred.

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<sup>17</sup> The Greek New Testament

All the matters so far considered above point to its being unlikely that there is a real discrepancy. The key point is that, instead of starting with the assumption that what looks to be a discrepancy really is one, we should start with the presumption that it is very unlikely that there is an actual conflict between John's Gospel and the Synoptics over the date of the Passover Supper. Our task is to see whether his statements must be taken to imply that there is such a conflict. Can they not rather be reconciled?

The factual background is important. There wasn't just a one-day feast. There was the Passover itself but that was followed by a seven-day feast of unleavened bread. And in ordinary parlance the whole period is sometimes known as 'the feast'. All the Synoptics for example refer, in slightly different terms, to the Day of Passover as being the first day of the feast of unleavened bread (Matt. 26.17. Mark 14.12. Luke 22.7). The day they are describing in each of those verses is before the Passover Supper has been eaten and so it is not the first of the following seven days which they mean, even though it is technically only those following seven which were days of the feast of unleavened bread.

Popularly, although technically not so, all eight days including the Day of Passover itself were the feast of unleavened bread. Living later in the same century, Josephus (a Pharisee and the son of a priest) even wrote; 'We keep a<sup>18</sup> feast for eight days, called the feast of unleavened bread.'

Walter Bauer<sup>19</sup> in his Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature sums this up: the 'popular usage merged the two festivals and treated them as a unity, as they were for practical purposes'. As does Dankers<sup>20</sup> in the same words.

Conversely, John's Gospel often uses the word Passover without necessarily focussing on the first of those eight days. 2.13 and 23. 11.55. 12.1. Because he is in those instances speaking of events before the Passover, a reader may well think that by 'Passover' he means 'the Day of Passover' but there is nothing to confine what he writes to that rather than to the whole eight day feast. Be that as it may, when he is writing of an event which happened later than the first of the eight days, in that instance 'Passover' clearly cannot mean the first day. And that is the case in the main occasion in which John has been thought to differ from the Synoptics, John 18.28. By 'Passover' there, he does not mean 'day of Passover'. 'There is ample evidence that 'the Passover' could refer to the combined feast of the paschal meal itself plus the ensuing Feast of Unleavened Bread.' (D.Carson).<sup>21</sup>

There we are told that 'they', i.e. those who had directed the proceedings against Jesus 'themselves did not go into the judgement hall lest they should be defiled; but that they should eat the Passover.'

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18 Antiquities ii.15.1

19 Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament etc

20 Greek-English Lexicon. P 784

21 The Gospel according to John. P. 589

Our immediate reaction is to suppose that 'eating the Passover' refers to the Passover Supper. Hendriksen<sup>22</sup> is driven to guessing that these leaders were so busy that they had postponed the meal. But we know from the Synoptic Gospels - and indeed from the similarity with their account of events in John's own account of the meal that evening - that that Supper had already been eaten the evening before, and we have seen that it is extremely unlikely that John was here suggesting anything different. Even though we cannot point to other instances of 'eating the Passover' not meaning 'eating the Passover Supper', we ought not to jump to a conclusion before asking; Could 'eating the Passover' have referred to some other meal? For the answer to that is, Yes.

On the second day of the eight-day Passover period, a thank-offering of the flock and herd was slain and eaten. While it is not readily evident to us, the knowledgeable contemporary reader, knowing (from all the preachings of the gospel they had heard) that the day of the Paschal Supper itself was by now over, could readily understand that it was ritual cleanliness so as to eat this further Passover meal (the chagigah) of which John was writing. Deuteronomy 16;2. Chumney<sup>23</sup> supports this explanation.

The term 'eat the passover' normally applied to the Paschal Supper, but by the late time when John wrote his Gospel - and perhaps especially if written mostly for Gentiles, as suggested by Rev. Samuel Andrews<sup>24</sup> he may well not have been too finicky over terminology for Jewish rituals anyway. The Jews were no longer centre stage. Compare 3.25. 5.1. 5.16 and so on.

And that also makes more sense. As Craig Blomberg points out<sup>25</sup> (and others had acknowledged), the defilement expired at sunset and so would not have prevented the eating of the Passover supper since that was an evening meal. If we insist that 'eating the Passover' must mean only 'eating the Passover Supper', then what John wrote makes no sense. He cannot have meant the Passover Supper. In the circumstances, is it not really rather perverse to insist that that was what he must have meant? The chagigah, on the other hand, was a midday meal and so would have been forbidden by ritual defilement that day.

And is it then because 18.28 has been so widely misunderstood that a forced interpretation has been given to 13.1 in order to make it fit with the misunderstanding of 18.28? The opening words 'before the Passover Feast' in 13.1 have been read to govern the whole of what follows, the washing of the feet and Our Lord's discourse at the Last Supper etc, despite the fact that that meal seems clearly enough to be the same meal which the Synoptics show to have been the Paschal Supper. Many commentators make this identification, even as long ago as such as Tholuck, Greswell, Alford, Meyer, Tischendorf, Robinson and others.

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<sup>22</sup> Commentary on John. P 463

<sup>23</sup> The Seven Festivals of the Messiah

<sup>24</sup> The Bible Student's Life of Our Lord p 387

<sup>25</sup> The Historical Reliability of the Gospels p.177,

It is only the forced interpretation which makes John put the Passover Supper after the Last Supper in line with the misreading of 18.28. The NIV even goes so far as to translate: 'It was before the Passover Feast' and then a new sentence: 'Jesus knew etc'. But that is not the natural meaning of the Greek words being translated. There is no 'It was'. There is just the one introductory sentence. The words 'Before the Passover Feast' are attached most naturally to the participles 'having known' and 'having loved'. (in the Greek they even come right next to 'having known' whereas in English we have to interpose the word 'Jesus').

The passage so read then makes obvious sense (and consistent with the Synoptic accounts). Jesus having known before the feast that the time had come for Him to leave the world and having then loved His own, He loved them to the end (or if you like to interpret it that way: 'showed them the full extent of His love' NIV), 'and' John goes flowingly on 'the supper having come' - what supper? Most obviously the Paschal Supper. And then all that follows. After Judas had left, Jesus gave a demonstration of this love which He had always had by washing the disciples' feet, and indeed by His lengthy teaching and supremely by His death.

With the problem thought to arise in 18.28 out of the way, we can adopt the more natural reading of 13.

There is one other verse which has caused some people trouble. John 19.14. Of the day of the crucifixion, John wrote 'And it was the preparation of the Passover.' This, it is said, means that on that day they were preparing for the Passover and so the Passover cannot have happened on the day of the Last Supper but was about to happen on the day after the crucifixion.. But this is a misunderstanding which arises simply because we no longer have the same usage when speaking of that day.

Because no work was allowed on the sabbath (any sabbath), the Saturday, much preparatory work had to be done on the day before, the Friday. So much so that that day became known both by its day name, the Hebrew or Aramaic equivalent of Friday, and also as 'the Preparation'. (Just as we can speak of the same day as either 'Sunday' or 'the Lord's Day'.) And this particular or Friday, occurred in the Passover period and so was 'the Preparation of the Passover', not the preparing of the Passover celebration but the day Preparation which fell in the Passover period..

Not exactly on all fours, but something like our own speaking of Easter Monday, the Monday which falls at Eastertide.

This is clear enough from verse 31 *ibid*. There the word 'Preparation' is clearly used in that sense. 'The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, so that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the sabbath day...' Compare also verse 42. And more specifically so in Mark 15.42 where he spells it out for us: 'because it was the preparation, that is the day before the sabbath'. Compare Matthew 27.62 and Luke 23.54.

Blomberg<sup>26</sup> tells us that the term was 'and still is used' as the standard word for Friday in the Greek language. Similarly Morris<sup>27</sup>. And in this case, the translators of the NIV<sup>28</sup> also agree. They translate the passage in John 19.14 'It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week'. It was the Friday which fell in that week.

And note that in so doing, it follows that (whether intended or not) they show that they also agree that John can use the word 'Passover' to mean not the Day of Passover itself but the whole Passover period. This supports the explanation of 18.28 on page 5 above, q. please v.

So the conflict between John's Gospel and the Synoptics is apparent but need not be real. We do not have to see a problem. John was writing from the contemporary viewpoint; he may be excused if he did not foresee that later generations (to be fair, as early as Origen) did not have the same understanding of matters and so saw difficulty.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid; p. 176

<sup>27</sup> The New International Commentary on the New Testament p.776.

<sup>28</sup> New International Version of the Bible

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