



The Crucifixion Timing: Passover, Preparation Day, and the Lamb of God

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Introduction

The timing of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ has long been the subject of scrutiny and debate, particularly when comparing the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, with the account given in John. On the surface, these accounts appear to present different chronologies. Matthew 26:17 states, “Now the first day of the feast of unleavened bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying unto him, Where wilt thou that we prepare for thee to eat the passover?” Yet John 19:14 declares, “And it was the preparation of the passover, and about the sixth hour.”

This apparent tension has led some to conclude that the Gospel writers are in disagreement. However, a careful and disciplined examination of the text reveals that the issue is not a contradiction but a matter of perspective. Each Gospel writer emphasizes different aspects of the same sequence of events, and when those perspectives are properly understood within their historical, linguistic, and theological context, the result is a unified and deeply significant narrative.

More importantly, this issue is not merely chronological; it is profoundly typological. The timing of the crucifixion is inseparable from the Passover, one of the central redemptive events in the Old Testament. The question, therefore, is not simply when Jesus died, but how His death fulfills the pattern established in Exodus. This is where the true depth of the Gospel accounts emerges.

The Structure and Terminology of Passover

To understand the timing of the crucifixion, it is essential to first understand how the term “Passover” is used in Scripture. Luke 22:1 provides a critical insight: “Now the feast of unleavened bread drew nigh, which is called the Passover.” This verse demonstrates that the term “Passover” can refer not only to the specific meal described in Exodus 12 but also to the entire festival period, including the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

In Exodus 12:6, the Passover lamb is to be killed “in the evening” on the fourteenth day of the month. Exodus 12:8 then describes the meal itself. However, the following days, beginning on the fifteenth, are part of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, as described in



Exodus 12:15: “Seven days shall ye eat unleavened bread.” Over time, these observances became closely associated, and the term “Passover” came to encompass the entire period.

This broader usage is critical for understanding John 18:28, which states that the Jewish leaders did not enter the judgment hall “lest they should be defiled; but that they might eat the passover.” This does not necessarily refer to the initial Passover meal but may refer to subsequent meals associated with the feast. Without recognizing this linguistic flexibility, the reader is likely to impose a false contradiction onto the text.

Thus, the first key to harmonization is recognizing that “Passover” is not a single moment but a multi-day observance, and the Gospel writers may use the term in different but legitimate ways.

The Last Supper as a Passover Meal

The Synoptic Gospels clearly identify the Last Supper as a Passover meal. Mark 14:12 states, “And the first day of unleavened bread, when they killed the passover, his disciples said unto him, Where wilt thou that we go and prepare that thou mayest eat the passover?” Matthew 26:19 confirms that “the disciples did as Jesus had appointed them; and they made ready the passover.”

These statements are explicit and leave little room for ambiguity. Jesus intentionally participates in the Passover meal with His disciples. However, during this meal, He introduces a profound transformation of its meaning. Luke 22:19-20 records, “And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you... Likewise, also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.”

This moment marks a transition from the old covenant to the new. The Passover, which originally commemorated deliverance from Egypt, is now redefined to point to deliverance from sin. The lamb that was once slain in Egypt is now replaced by the Lamb who will be slain for the world.

This transformation is not a departure from the Passover but its fulfillment. The symbols of the meal, bread and wine, are given new meaning, pointing directly to the sacrifice that is about to occur.



John's Perspective and the Preparation of the Passover

John's Gospel approaches the crucifixion with a distinct theological emphasis. John 19:14 states, "And it was the preparation of the passover, and about the sixth hour: and he saith unto the Jews, Behold your King!" At first glance, this appears to place the crucifixion before the Passover meal, in contrast to the Synoptic accounts.

However, this interpretation assumes that "preparation of the passover" refers exclusively to the preparation of the Passover meal itself. In reality, the term "preparation" (Greek: *paraskeuē*) can refer more broadly to preparation within the festival period, particularly in relation to the Sabbath that follows.

John 19:31 provides additional clarification: "The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain upon the cross on the sabbath day... besought Pilate that their legs might be broken." This indicates that the preparation is connected to the approaching Sabbath, which occurs during the Passover week.

Thus, John's account does not contradict the Synoptics but emphasizes a different aspect of the same timeframe. His focus is not on the meal itself but on the theological significance of the timing of Jesus' death.

The Typological Fulfillment of the Passover Lamb

The deeper significance of the crucifixion emerges when it is viewed through the lens of typology. The Passover lamb described in Exodus 12 establishes a pattern that is fulfilled in Christ.

Exodus 12:5 states, "Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year." This requirement is fulfilled in Christ, as described in 1 Peter 1:19: "But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot."

Exodus 12:46 states, "Neither shall ye break a bone thereof." This is explicitly fulfilled in John 19:36: "For these things were done, that the scripture should be fulfilled, A bone of him shall not be broken."

Exodus 12:7 describes the application of the lamb's blood to the doorposts, which protects the household from judgment. This prefigures the application of Christ's blood for the forgiveness of sins, as described in Hebrews 9:22: "Without shedding of blood is no remission."



These correspondences are not incidental; they demonstrate that the crucifixion is the culmination of a pattern established centuries earlier. The timing, the method, and the details all align with remarkable precision.

Divine Timing and the Sovereignty of God

The crucifixion is not merely an event in history; it is orchestrated according to divine timing. Acts 2:23 states, “Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.”

This verse emphasizes that the crucifixion is both a human act and a divine plan. The actions of those involved are real and culpable, yet they occur within the framework of God’s predetermined purpose.

The alignment of the crucifixion with the Passover is part of this divine orchestration. The Lamb is slain at the appointed time, fulfilling the pattern established in Exodus and revealing the consistency of God’s redemptive plan.

The Unity of the Gospel Accounts

When the Gospel accounts are read together, the apparent contradictions dissolve. The Synoptics emphasize the Passover meal and its transformation, while John emphasizes the theological significance of the crucifixion’s timing. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive but complementary.

The result is a multi-dimensional account that captures both the historical sequence and the theological meaning of the events. The differences in emphasis enhance the narrative rather than undermine it, providing a fuller understanding of what took place.

Conclusion

The question of the timing of the crucifixion is resolved not by dismissing one account in favor of another, but by understanding the context in which each account is written. The use of the term “Passover,” the structure of the feast, and the typological significance of the events all contribute to a unified narrative.

Jesus Christ fulfills the Passover in every detail. He is the Lamb without blemish, whose blood brings redemption. His death occurs at the appointed time, in perfect alignment with the pattern established in Exodus. The Gospel accounts, when properly understood, reveal not contradiction but a profound and deliberate unity that points to the sovereignty of God



and the fulfillment of His redemptive plan.