

The Lord's Supper Controversies

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One of the greatest controversies related to New Testament doctrine concerns the timing of the Lord's Supper and the Passover and how they relate to one another. Three of the four gospel accounts appear to support the idea that the Passover, which is to be observed at the end of the 14th day of the first month (Abib/Nissan), fell on the previous evening when Jesus Christ and his disciples observed the Lord's Supper, prior to Christ's betrayal by Judas Iscariot. It is therefore concluded that Christ and his disciples ate the Passover meal according to the appointed time written in the law (Ex. 12:6), before Christ's death. The book of John, however, clearly contradicts this view.

For example, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all describe the Passover meal as something the disciples were instructed to prepare so that they and Christ could eat it together (Mt. 26:17-18; Mk. 14:13-15; Lk. 22:7-12). Each book states they prepared the Passover meal (Mt. 26:19; Mk. 14:16; Lk. 22:13).

During the meal on the evening Christ was betrayed he said, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Lk. 22:15). This statement appears to indicate the meal they were sharing was THE Passover meal.

This does not line up as scripture states the Passover is observed the following day on the evening of 14th of the first month, after dark, at the beginning of the 15th (Ex. 12:6), which is the First Day of Unleavened Bread – a Holy Day or High Sabbath (Jn. 19:31). The day the Lambs were killed leading up to the Passover meal was a Preparation Day. It was on this day before the Passover meal that Jesus Christ was sacrificed (Jn. 19:14).

John states very clearly the meal Christ had with his disciples on the evening he was betrayed occurred, "before the Feast of Passover" (Jn. 13:1) and therefore could not have been the 'first day of Unleavened Bread' as it appears to say in the other gospel accounts. John also records that some of the disciples who were with Christ after his arrest did not enter the Praetorium so that they would not be defiled before eating the Passover (Jn. 18:28). The gospel of John leaves no doubt that the evening during which Christ and his disciples partook of the new symbols of the Passover was approximately 24 hours prior to the end of the 14th and beginning of the 15th day of the first month.

John's chronology also fits the timing of the Passover according to the law and the prophecies concerning Christ's death – which it must. Consequently, the account surrounding Christ's arrest and execution according to John cannot be disputed. The fact that Christ introduced the second covenant with its new symbols on the evening

before his death, and therefore, before the Passover, is likewise not in debate (Mt. 26:28; Mk. 14:24; Lk. 22:20).

Neither Matthew, Mark, or Luke have any significant discrepancies concerning the events related to the Passover at the time of Christ's death. Nor is there any textual evidence indicating the Greek manuscripts have been altered in these passages. Thus, we are left with the only reasonable course of action – to examine the language used in the synoptic gospel accounts regarding the Lord's Supper and the Passover, in order to try to reconcile any apparent discrepancies.

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Where do you want us to prepare for you to eat the Passover?" (Mt. 26:17)

The translation below renders the Greek text of Matthew 26:17 as follows,

And in the first of the unleavened, the disciples came toward Jesus, saying, "Where do you want us to prepare for you to eat the Passover?" (Mt. 26:17, RNT)

The expression, "the first of the unleavened" in Matthew 26:17, is often considered to refer to the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread as it is commonly rendered. Consequently, in most English translations the word "day" was added to support this conclusion. It is then argued that Christ and his disciples did in fact eat the Passover meal at the beginning of the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. However, this clearly contradicts the correct chronological sequence according to the law of God and the account of John (De. 16:4). This false conclusion also contradicts several New Testament scriptures and numerous other Bible passages pertaining to the spring holy days.

One explanation that accounts for the curious figure of speech in Matthew 26:17, and fits the sequence of events, is that it refers to the first responsibility in the observance of the Spring Feast, which is to remove all the leaven from one's dwelling place prior to the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This is undertaken before the Passover (Ex. 12:15; 1Cor. 5:7).

The expression "the first of the unleavened" could well mean "the first day", however, it may well be a reference to the first day that involves an activity central to the Feast, which is the removal of all unleavened bread prior to the commencement of the Feast.

There is another possibility that could explain the unusual phrasing of the Passover texts in the NT. The beginning of Matthew 28:1 deals with Christ's resurrection and is generally rendered,

Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week.

Here again we find the English word “day” added to the translation in order to convey the idea that Matthew intended to refer to the first day of the week. The word “day” is not found in the Greek manuscripts but it’s argued that “day” is implied by the structure of the sentence. We also find the English word “first” as in Matthew 26:17, however, the word from which it is translated is heís (SGD 1520), the Greek word for the cardinal number one. The Greek word translated “first” in Matthew 26:17 is prótos (SGD 4413), it is the superlative of 4253 Gk. pró, meaning forward or at the front, foremost, primary; hence it can be understood as, first, however, it can also be used to convey the sense of former, formerly, before anything else, or before.

There are three other occurrences of the Greek work prótos (SGD 4413) in the New Testament such as, John 1:15, 30; 15:18. In each case it is rendered “before”. Consequently, it is possible that the use of prótos in Matthew 26:17 could be intended to mean, “before the first day of the week”.

Mark 14:12 uses similar language but is more specific,

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they killed the Passover lamb, His disciples said to Him, "Where do You want us to go and prepare, that You may eat the Passover?" (NASB)

Again, it says the day in question is the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, but this conclusion cannot be correct according to instructions in the law, which state emphatically that no work is to be done on Holy Days or Sabbaths (Ex. 12:16; Lev. 23:7; Am. 8:5). In addition, the day prior to the Passover, which is called “the preparation day”, is for the explicit purpose of activities associated with preparation before all Sabbath days, including the first Holy Day of the Feast Unleavened Bread (Mk. 15:42; Lk. 23:54; Jn. 19:14, 31, 42).

Another scripture appears to indicate that the evening Christ and his disciples gathered for the meal, during which Christ instituted the symbols of the Lord’s Supper, was the first day of Unleavened Bread, “when they killed the Passover”. The same Greek word in this text, (prótos, SGD 4413) is translated “first” even though the narrative demonstrates that it could not be the first day of Unleavened Bread because the disciples asked where they were to prepare for the Passover, which according to the law and other texts, is sacrificed before the Feast of Unleavened Bread and observed after the preparation day at the beginning of the 15th day of the first month – the first day of the Feast (Ex. 12:6; Jn. 19:14). However, if the word translated “first” is rendered “before” as it is in three places in the book of John, the narrative makes more sense,

And on the day before (prótos, SGD 4413) Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover, his disciples said to him, “Where do you want us to go and prepare that you may eat the Passover?” (Mk. 14:12, RNT)

When the synoptic gospel accounts are compared with the Book of John, the law of God, and the testimonies of Christ, there is only one conclusion that fits, that Jesus Christ introduced the new symbols of the second covenant at the only time possible – in the evening at the beginning of the 14th of the first month, on the preparation day prior to the Passover and first day of Unleavened Bread, the final evening before his death (Jn. 19:30-31).

The reason this timing was most appropriate is because Jesus Christ is the Passover Lamb of God (Jn. 1:29) and thus the reality which the Passover meal pointed towards. Therefore, the first covenant symbol of the roasted lamb, which represented the work of Christ, was not necessary to observe following his death. It is important to note that Christ's disciples were not able to observe the Passover at the end of the 14th of the first month because they would be scattered,

Then Jesus said to them, "You will all be caused to stumble on account of me on this night, for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be thoroughly scattered'" (Mt. 26:31).

When the purpose and significance of the symbols of the Passover are carefully examined, it becomes evident they point to the same reality represented by the symbols of the second covenant – salvation through the shed blood of the perfect sacrifice, Jesus Christ.

Consequently, the new symbols of unleavened bread representing the broken body of Christ and the wine representing the shed blood of Christ of the new covenant, now point back to his death as an annual memorial. Thus the new symbols of the Lord's Supper replace the Passover lamb eaten at the beginning of the 15th of the first month. The apostle Paul made this point very clear when he said,

For Christ our Passover was sacrificed (1Cor. 5:7b).

The Bible clearly teaches the annual Passover occurs on a specific day in God's calendar (Ex. 12:1-11, 14-27; Lev. 23:5; Num. 9:5; De. 16:1-8; Lk. 22:15-16; 1Cor. 5:8). The Lord's Supper/Passover is an annual reminder of the salvific work of Jesus Christ and part of the sanctification process which begins on the 1st day of the first month (Ez. 45:18-21; Jn. 17:17, 19), and concludes on the 21st day, the last day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Therefore, the new covenant symbols Christ introduced are intended to be observed in place of the symbols of the first covenant Passover meal at the commencement of the 15th day of the first month,

And when he had taken some bread and 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." 20 And in the same way he took the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Lk. 22:19-20, emphasis added).

Now that the relevant facts pertaining to the observance of the Passover/Lord's Supper have been examined from scripture, it can be seen that the apparent contradictions are in actual fact fully reconciled and the correct sequence of this appointed time established.

This document is the collaborative work of individuals who believe God's truth should be given freely (Mt. 10:8; 1Cor. 2:12; 2Cor.11:7; Rom. 10:14-21) and the message of the one true God should be made available to all nations (Mt. 24:14) as a prerequisite to the return of Jesus Christ as King of kings (Mt. 17:10; 19:17; Mk. 9:11; Lk. 1:17; Rev. 19:11-16).

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