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I. *The Dating of the Last Supper*

The problem of dating Jesus' Last Supper arises from the contradiction on this point between the Synoptic Gospels, on the one hand, and Saint John's Gospel, on the other. Mark, whom Matthew and Luke follow in essentials, gives us a precise dating: "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 when it was evening he came with the Twelve" (14:12, 17). The evening of the first day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Paschal lambs are slaughtered in the Temple, is the vigil of the Passover feast. According to the chronology of the Synoptics, this was a Thursday.

After sunset, the Passover began, and then the Passover meal was taken—by Jesus and his disciples, as indeed by all the pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem. On the night leading into Friday, then—still according to the Synoptic chronology—Jesus was arrested and brought before the court; on Friday morning he was condemned to death by Pilate, and subsequently, “around the third hour” (ca. 9:00 A.M.), he was led to the Cross. Jesus died at the ninth hour (ca. 3:00 P.M.). “And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea . . . took courage and went to Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus” (Mk 15:42–43). The burial had to take place before sunset, because then the Sabbath would begin. The Sabbath is the day when Jesus rested in the tomb. The Resurrection took place on the morning of the “first day of the week”, on Sunday.

This chronology suffers from the problem that Jesus’ trial and crucifixion would have taken place on the day of the Passover feast, which that year fell on a Friday. True, many scholars have tried to show that the trial and crucifixion were compatible with the prescriptions of the Passover. But despite all academic arguments, it seems questionable whether the trial before Pilate and the crucifixion would have been permissible and possible on such an important Jewish feast day. Moreover, there is a comment reported by Mark that militates against this hypothesis. He tells us that two days before the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the chief priests and scribes were looking for an opportunity to bring Jesus under their control by stealth and kill him, but in this regard, they

declared: "not during the feast, lest there be a tumult of the people" (14:1-2). According to the Synoptic chronology, the execution of Jesus would indeed have taken place on the very day of the feast.

Let us now turn to John's chronology. John goes to great lengths to indicate that the Last Supper was not a Passover meal. On the contrary: the Jewish authorities who led Jesus before Pilate's court avoided entering the praetorium, "so that they might not be defiled, but might eat the Passover" (18:28). The Passover, therefore, began only in the evening, and at the time of the trial the Passover meal had not yet taken place; the trial and crucifixion took place on the day before the Passover, on the "day of preparation", not on the feast day itself. The Passover feast in the year in question accordingly ran from Friday evening until Saturday evening, not from Thursday evening until Friday evening.

Otherwise the sequence of events remains the same: Thursday evening—Jesus' Last Supper with the disciples, but not a Passover meal; Friday, the vigil of the feast, not the feast itself—trial and execution; Saturday—rest in the tomb; Sunday—Resurrection. According to this chronology, Jesus dies at the moment when the Passover lambs are being slaughtered in the Temple. Jesus dies as the real lamb, merely prefigured by those slain in the Temple.

This theologically significant connection, that Jesus' death coincides with the slaughter of the Passover lambs, has led many scholars to dismiss John's presentation as a theological chronology. John, they claim, altered the

chronology in order to create this theological connection, which admittedly is not made explicit in the Gospel. Today, though, it is becoming increasingly clear that John's chronology is more probable historically than the Synoptic chronology. For as mentioned earlier: trial and execution on the feast seem scarcely conceivable. On the other hand, Jesus' Last Supper seems so closely tied to the Passover tradition that to deny its Passover character is problematic.

Frequent attempts have been made, therefore, to reconcile the two chronologies with one another. A most important and indeed fascinating attempt to harmonize the two traditions was made by the French scholar Annie Jaubert, who developed her theory in a series of publications starting in 1953. We need not go into the details of this proposal here; let us confine ourselves to the essentials.

Jaubert bases herself primarily on two early texts, which seem to suggest a solution to the problem. First she refers to an ancient priestly calendar handed down in the *Book of Jubilees*, which was a Hebrew text produced in the second half of the second century before Christ. This calendar leaves the cycles of the moon out of consideration and bases itself upon a year of 364 days, divided into four seasons, each consisting of three months, two of them thirty days long and one thirty-one days long. Each quarter year, then, has ninety-one days, which is exactly thirteen weeks, and each year has exactly fifty-two weeks. Accordingly, the liturgical feasts fall on the same weekday every year. For the Passover, this means that the fifteenth day of Nisan is always a Wednesday and the Passover meal

is held after sunset on Tuesday evening. According to Jaubert, Jesus celebrated the Passover following this calendar, that is, on Tuesday evening, and was arrested during the night leading into Wednesday.

Jaubert sees here the solution to two problems: first, Jesus celebrated a real Passover meal, as the Synoptic tradition maintains; yet John is also right, in that the Jewish authorities, following their own calendar, did not celebrate the Passover until after Jesus' trial, and Jesus was therefore executed on the vigil of the real Passover, not on the feast itself. Both the Synoptic and the Johannine traditions thus appear to be correct on the basis of the discrepancy between two different calendars.

The second advantage emphasized by Annie Jaubert shows at the same time the weakness of this attempted solution. She points out that the traditional chronologies (Synoptic *and* Johannine) have to compress a whole series of events into a few hours: the hearing before the Sanhedrin, Jesus being sent over to Pilate, Pilate's wife's dream, Jesus being handed over to Herod, his return to Pilate, the scourging, the condemnation to death, the way of the Cross, and the crucifixion. To accomplish all this in the space of a few hours seems scarcely possible, according to Jaubert. Her solution, though, provides a time frame from the night leading into Wednesday to the morning of Good Friday.

She also argues that Mark gives a precise sequence of events for "Palm Sunday", Monday, and Tuesday, but then leaps directly to the Passover meal. According to the traditional dating, then, two days remain of which

nothing is recounted. Finally, Jaubert reminds us that, if her theory is correct, the Jewish authorities could have succeeded in their plan to kill Jesus in good time before the feast. Pilate then delayed the crucifixion until Friday, so the theory goes, through his hesitations.

One argument against this redating of the Last Supper to Tuesday, of course, is the long tradition assigning it to Thursday, which we find clearly established as early as the second century. Jaubert responds by pointing to the second text on which her theory is based: the so-called *Didascalia Apostolorum*, a text from the early third century that places the Last Supper on Tuesday. She tries to show that this book preserved an old tradition, traces of which are also found in other texts.

In reply it must be said that the traces of tradition to which she refers are too weak to be convincing. The other difficulty is that Jesus is unlikely to have used a calendar associated principally with Qumran. Jesus went to the Temple for the great feasts. Even if he prophesied its demise and confirmed this with a dramatic symbolic action, he still followed the Jewish festal calendar, as is evident from John's Gospel in particular. True, one can agree with Jaubert that the Jubilees calendar was not strictly limited to Qumran and the Essenes. Yet this is not sufficient to justify applying it to Jesus' Passover. Thus it is understandable that Annie Jaubert's theory—so fascinating on first sight—is rejected by the majority of exegetes.

I have presented it in some detail because it offers an insight into the complexity of the Jewish world at the

time of Jesus, a world that we can reconstruct only to a limited degree, despite all the knowledge of sources now available to us. So while I would not reject this theory outright, it cannot simply be accepted at face value, in view of the various problems that remain unresolved.

So what are we to say? The most meticulous evaluation I have come across of all the solutions proposed so far is found in the book *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, by John P. Meier, who at the end of his first volume presents a comprehensive study of the chronology of Jesus' life. He concludes that one has to choose between the Synoptic and Johannine chronologies, and he argues, on the basis of the whole range of source material, that the weight of evidence favors John.

John is right when he says that at the time of Jesus' trial before Pilate, the Jewish authorities had not yet eaten the Passover and, thus, had to keep themselves ritually pure. He is right that the crucifixion took place, not on the feast, but on the day before the feast. This means that Jesus died at the hour when the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the Temple. That Christians later saw this as no coincidence, that they recognized Jesus as the true Lamb, that in this way they came to see the true meaning of the ritual of the lambs—all this seems to follow naturally.

The question remains: Why did the Synoptics speak of a Passover meal? What is the basis for this strand of tradition? Not even Meier can give a truly convincing answer to this question. He makes an attempt—like many other exegetes—through redaction criticism and literary

criticism. He argues that Mark 14:1a and 14:12-16—the only passages in which Mark mentions the Passover—were later additions. In the actual account of the Last Supper itself, he claims, there is no reference to the Passover.

This argument, however many major figures have come out in support of it, is artificial. Yet Meier is right to point out that in the description of the meal itself, the Synoptics recount as little of the Passover ritual as John. Thus with certain reservations, one can agree with his conclusion: “The entire Johannine tradition, from early to late, agrees perfectly with the primitive Synoptic tradition on the non-Passover character of the meal” (*A Marginal Jew* I, p. 398).

We have to ask, though, what Jesus’ Last Supper actually was. And how did it acquire its undoubtedly early attribution of Passover character? The answer given by Meier is astonishingly simple and in many respects convincing: Jesus knew that he was about to die. He knew that he would not be able to eat the Passover again. Fully aware of this, he invited his disciples to a Last Supper of a very special kind, one that followed no specific Jewish ritual but, rather, constituted his farewell; during the meal he gave them something new: he gave them himself as the true Lamb and thereby instituted *his* Passover.

In all the Synoptic Gospels, the prophecy of Jesus’ death and Resurrection form part of this meal. Luke presents it in an especially solemn and mysterious form: “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" (22:15–16). The saying is ambiguous. It can mean that Jesus is eating the usual Passover meal with his disciples for the last time. But it can also mean that he is eating it no longer but, rather, is on his way to the new Passover.

One thing emerges clearly from the entire tradition: essentially, this farewell meal was not the old Passover, but the new one, which Jesus accomplished in this context. Even though the meal that Jesus shared with the Twelve was not a Passover meal according to the ritual prescriptions of Judaism, nevertheless, in retrospect, the inner connection of the whole event with Jesus' death and Resurrection stood out clearly. It was Jesus' Passover. And in this sense he both did and did not celebrate the Passover: the old rituals could not be carried out—when their time came, Jesus had already died. But he had given himself, and thus he had truly celebrated the Passover with them. The old was not abolished; it was simply brought to its full meaning.

The earliest evidence for this unified view of the new and the old, providing a new explanation of the Passover character of Jesus' meal in terms of his death and Resurrection, is found in Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: "Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be new dough, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Paschal Lamb, has been sacrificed" (5:7; cf. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* I, pp. 429–30). As in Mark 14:1, so here the first day of Unleavened Bread and the Passover follow in rapid succession, but the older ritual understanding is transformed into a Christological and existential interpretation. Unleavened

bread must now refer to Christians themselves, who are freed from sin by the addition of yeast. But the sacrificial lamb is Christ. Here Paul is in complete harmony with John's presentation of events. For him the death and Resurrection of Christ have become the Passover that endures.

On this basis one can understand how it was that very early on, Jesus' Last Supper—which includes not only a prophecy, but a real anticipation of the Cross and Resurrection in the eucharistic gifts—was regarded as a Passover: as *his* Passover. And so it was.