

DAVID SERLE **Good Thursday?**

FOUR PUZZLES OF THE HOLY WEEK

'3 days and 3 nights' doesn't make sense unless you're prepared to dig deeper into God's Word

The week in which Jesus was crucified – and rose again – is the most momentous in world history. It is true to say that more has been written about this week than any other. Yet the key information sources about the last week of Jesus – the gospels – appear to contradict each other. Given the issues at stake, we should resolve apparent difficulties and establish whether there are indeed contradictions.

Some scholars consider the New Testament unreliable because of apparent discrepancies in the accounts of these seven days. Non-believers query, not unreasonably, *if the gospel accounts cannot be harmonized on key events such as the day of the crucifixion and the date and nature of 'the last supper', then why should people trust them at all?* This article demonstrates, at least in outline, that the gospels do not disagree on key events, and provide a dependable basis for belief.

Fixed Points

This article incorporates a timeline that has been carefully compiled from the biblical evidence and locates events in a manner that makes sense from the Biblical text itself. It is offered on that basis, and framed between two fixed points upon which everyone agrees: (1) Jesus arrived in Bethany six days before Passover (John 12:1) and (2) the resurrection of Jesus on the first day of

the week. There are two key facts that we need to keep in mind. The first is that Jesus was raised from the tomb at some time around sun-rise on what the Bible calls *"the first day of the week"*. The second is that Jesus' body had to be placed in a tomb before the Sabbath, which was absolutely a non-working day and burying of the dead would be considered *"work"*. Having been crucified, the body was to be underground (in its tomb) before the commencement of the Sabbath. As the normal Jewish Sabbath is Saturday, the assumption has long been that Jesus' body was laid to rest late on Friday afternoon, before sunset. In many people's minds these two facts constitute the *"fixed geometry"* of the Biblical pattern. Yet we need to resolve the Lord's emphatic prophecy: *For as 'Jonah was in the belly of the monster three days and three nights' so also the*

Son of Man will be in the heart of the Earth three days and three nights (Matthew 12:40 One New Man Bible). We cannot "fix" three days and nights between Friday PM and Sunday AM!

What this *Friday-Sunday* scheme fails to take into account, however, is that something very special was happening in Jerusalem at the time of the Crucifixion. *The Feast of Unleavened Bread* was underway, which necessarily incorporates its own *High Sabbath*. The simple question becomes, was the *High Sabbath* the same as the *weekly Sabbath* – did they happen to occur on the same day? We note something important: the *Feast of Unleavened Bread* encompasses three *Moeds* (or appointed meetings)¹ each of which speaks in differing ways about the crucifixion and resurrection:

Suggested chronology of Holy Week

Our weekdays	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY
NISAN	9	10	11	12	13
Time	Midnight to 6pm	Midnight to 6pm	Midnight to 6pm	Midnight to 6pm	Midnight to 6pm
Jewish Festival		Select lambs for Passover Ex. 12:3	Examine lambs for three days to confirm no fault in them Ex. 12:5-6		
Sacrifices	Daily sacrifices 9am and 3pm	Daily sacrifices 9am and 3pm	Daily sacrifices 9am and 3pm	Daily sacrifices 9am and 3pm	Daily sacrifices 9am and 3pm
Jesus' Activity		Meal at Bethany Anointed to be King	Triumphal Entry	Examination by Jewish Leaders daily in the Temple (Chief Priests, Elders, Pharisees, Saducees, Herodians) Couldn't find any fault in Him Cleansing the Temple	Disciples prepare for Passover (Preparation of the Passover)
Bible	John 12: 1-8 <i>Weekly Sabbath</i>	Matthew 21: 1-11 Mark 11: 1-11 Luke 19: 29-44	Matthew 21: 12-17 Mark 11: 15-17 Luke 19: 45-48	Matthew 21 and 22 Mark 11 and 12 Luke 20	Matthew 26
	6pm to Midnight	6pm to Midnight	6pm to Midnight	6pm to Midnight	6pm to Midnight

Note: in the official calendar (post exile), days begin at sundown (taken as 6pm for simplicity in the chart).

Part days counted as whole days as noted in Jerusalem Talmud Shabbath 9:3; Babylonian Talmud Pesahim 49

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■ **Passover**

■ **Unleavened Bread** (a seven day remembrance that follows immediately after the Passover), and

■ **First Fruits.**

The day of Resurrection is prophetically and literally *First Fruits*, and we are told plainly by the apostle *Paul* that Jesus is our “*first fruits*” and the pioneer of all those whom God will “*raise*” eternally: *Messiah has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Messiah all will be made alive. But each in turn: Messiah, the first fruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him (1 Corinthians 15:20-23, GNT).* Paul reminds the Corinthians that *Jesus is the First Fruits.*

He was addressing a predominantly Jewish church and the meaning of the *Moed of First Fruits* would have been clear to them, as believing Jews, albeit the festival may be obscure to us today. Allowing that Jesus was raised at *First Fruits*, the third day after Passover, this fact would have been common knowledge and to that extent, not requiring further explanation.

It is our modern loss of insight into First Fruits that leads to confusion about the timing of events.

First Fruits was “*the third day*” after Passover, so when Jesus used the phrase “*the third day*” (*Matthew 16:21; Matthew 17:23 and Mathew 20:19*) His listeners would perhaps, on later reflection, have perceived precisely what He had meant when He foretold what would happen. ***Jesus had identified on precisely which day He would be raised, with all the***

theological and prophetic importance that is attached to this Moed.

Four Puzzles

As mentioned earlier, reading the accounts of the last days of Jesus in the gospels, we find there are a number of places where they appear to state things that are contradictory. Matthew, Mark and Luke say that the final meal Jesus shared with His disciples was a Passover, whereas John states that this final meal, the judicial trials of Jesus and His crucifixion, all took place before the Passover meal. To this, and three other seeming contradictions in the gospel records of the Holy Week, we now turn our attention in this article. (A forthcoming book “*Three Days and Three Nights – that changed the world*”² aims to explore these ‘problems’ in a definitive way).

WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY					FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY			
13	14					15	16	17			
Midnight to 6pm	0 – 6am	6 – 9am	9 – Noon	Noon – 3pm	3pm – 6pm	Midnight to 6pm	Midnight to 6pm	Midnight to 6pm			
in them	PASSOVER (post-exile calendar) The ‘Preparation’ i.e. for the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover and Unleavened Bread together are referred to as Passover)					UNLEAVENED BREAD (eaten for 7 days) UB Day 1 UB Day 2		FIRSTFRUITS UB Day 3			
Daily sacrifices 9am and 3pm			Sacrifice at 9am	3pm lamb killed at Noon	The Passover Lamb at 3pm	Daily sacrifices 9am and 3pm	Daily sacrifices 9am and 3pm	Daily sacrifices 9am and 3pm			
Disciples prepare for Passover (Pre-exile calendar)	Last Supper	Jewish Trials	Gentile Trials	Crucifixion	Darkness	It is finished!		Resurrection!	Jesus appears to the disciples		
	Arrest					Burial					
Three days and three nights (part of day counts as whole day)											
Matthew 26: 6-13 Mark 14: 3-9	Matthew 26: 59-68	Matthew 27: 11-14 Luke 23: 6-12	Acts 4: 27		1 Cor: 5-7 Christ our Passover	6pm to Midnight	1 Cor: 5: 8 Let us keep the feast	6pm to Midnight	John 20: 1-8 Luke 24: 1-12 1 Cor: 15: 20 Christ the Firstfruits	Luke 24: 13-49 John 20: 19-23	6pm to Midnight
	6pm to Midnight					6pm to Midnight	High Sabbath	6pm to Midnight	Weekly Sabbath	6pm to Midnight	First day of the week

1) The 'lost day' in the middle of 'Holy Week'

Matthew devotes seven of his twenty eight chapters to the week leading to Jesus' crucifixion. The same week absorbs 30 per cent of **Mark's** gospel, about 20 per cent of **Luke** and almost 40 per cent of **John**. Despite this considerable body of information, as biblical scholars try to reconstruct what happened on each day of this week, **some think they discern a 'lost day' when nothing happened.** This is the 'Wednesday' before what they assume to be a Friday crucifixion. Interestingly, the popular NIV Study Bible comments 'Day of rest: Wednesday: Not mentioned in the Gospels.' Whilst this view is by no means universal amongst scholars, it is predicated on an assumed "Friday" crucifixion. As our chart indicates, the final week of Jesus can be adequately understood once we question the traditional "Friday" to "Sunday" schema. A Wednesday or Thursday crucifixion is the approach adopted by most Biblically conservative commentators these days. On that basis we make no further comment here on a supposed missing day. *Had a day devoid of any activity been a part of Jesus' momentous final week, surely at least one Gospel writer would have so commented?*

2) The problem of the last supper

The debate is around the precise relationship of the 'last supper' to the Jewish Passover. As we've said above, **Matthew, Mark and Luke** state that the last supper was a Passover. By contrast, **John** equally clearly says that the last supper was held before the Passover meal. **John P. Meier** writes: "The Synoptics and John are in direct disagreement over the nature of the last supper as a Passover meal and over the date of Jesus' death."³ The Passover was, and remains today, the most important meal of the year for Jews. It commemorates the exodus from **Egypt** and the birth of **Israel** as a nation. We can assume, then, that **the gospel writers, as serious**

witnesses and writing with a serious purpose, are unlikely to have made a mistake about this! Why do the gospels apparently disagree? We should bear in mind the beginning of **Luke's** gospel: 'Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word'.

Luke claims eye-witness sources, who would have known whether or not the 'last supper' was a Passover!



Whilst the problem of the nature of the last supper has been well known to scholars for centuries, little attempt has been made to deal with it. There is a theory, slowly gaining support, that in First-Century Israel (specifically the Roman provinces of Galilee and Judaea) there existed two Jewish calendars; a *pre-exile calendar*, used extensively in Galilee (where Jesus was raised) and a *post-exile calendar*, used extensively by the Judean metropolitan elite.⁴ The theory expresses that pious Jews would have used the pre-exile calendar as this was the same as that instituted by **Moses**. This theory was supported indirectly by **Pope Benedict XVI** in 2007 when he stated "[Jesus] celebrated Passover with His disciples probably according to the

calendar of Qumran; that is to say, one day earlier [than Passover in the official Jewish calendar]". His theory is far from far-fetched! Even today there are variances in calendars in use. The **Gregorian** calendar is most common in the West, and governs **Roman Catholic** and most **Protestant** observances, yet the **Orthodox Churches** celebrate "Christmas" and "Easter" according to the old **Julian** calendar. We all know that the Chinese new year is marked in accordance with the Chinese calendar. This year (2018) is the year 5778 by the Jewish calendar! There remain today a confusing number of calendars. The position was not dissimilar in First-Century Judaea

This article is not the place to resolve this question fully. However, **Colin J. Humphreys'** recent book "The Mystery of the Last Supper" (Cambridge University Press, 2011) fully explores the two-calendar theory. Whilst there are many detail issues open to debate and question on Humphrey's book, the two-calendar theory allows an entirely reasonable solution to the "problem". Conservative scholar **I. Howard Marshall** in "Last Supper & Lord's Supper" (Paternoster, 1980) reached the same conclusion: "... Jesus held a Passover meal earlier than the official Jewish date, and he was able to do so as the result of calendar differences among the Jews."

3) Insufficient time for the trials of Jesus

Some state that there was simply not enough time for the trials and all the other events between the arrest of Jesus and His crucifixion. The night of the arrest leading through to the crucifixion was undoubtedly an intensely busy one, yet the geographical area in which the events took place is amazingly small. If one places a compass point on the site of the Hasmonean Palace within Jerusalem and draws a circle to the Garden of Gethsemane outside Jerusalem, then the radius is just over half a mile as the crow flies! Allowing that the events were propelled at a cracking pace by the

secular and religious authorities' overriding need to have Jesus dead and buried before Passover, it is likely that the events took place in 11 out of a possible 15 hours available. Whilst certainly "busy", the schedule could be accommodated fully within those 15 hours. This view may be open to challenge, yet it does cast serious doubt on the idea that there was insufficient time.

4) The legality of the trials

Scholars are generally agreed that the trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin was at night. It is said that Jewish rules regarding trials for capital cases would not allow for this. These rules are stated in the *Mishnah* (a compendium containing regulations attributed to approx 150 rabbis during the period 50 BC to 200 AD): *'In capital cases they hold the trial during the daytime and the verdict must also be reached during the daytime ... In capital cases a verdict of acquittal may be reached the same day, but a verdict of conviction not until the following day'* (*Mishnah Sanhedrin 4.1*). Note these are post-apostolic period writings. In reality we do not know what rules were applied. In the extraordinary circumstances of the trial of political prisoner Jesus, whether legal rules were rigorously applied, must be open to serious question.

Jesus had been, in the minds of the Jewish authorities, both secular and religious, a dead man for at least some months, if not years, prior to the staged trial. Jesus had been the subject of hostile questioning and investigation throughout His public ministry. Any reading of the Gospel accounts makes this abundantly clear. It seems that the *Sanhedrin* wanted to arrest Jesus earlier in His ministry. John 7: 45-52 suggests, intriguingly, that they had in mind to interrogate Jesus – and perhaps more. Before the arrest High Priest *Caiaphas* had already made his infamous quote that *"it is better that one man should die than a whole nation perish"* (*John 11:50*). In John 11:53 it is clear that the die was



cast and the scene was set. In Matthew 12:14 (half way through Jesus' ministry), the *Pharisees* were already plotting Jesus' death. The secular authorities were no better. Just as *Herod the Great* had tried to murder the infant Jesus, so his grandson *Herod Agrippa* bore a grudge against Him. Luke tells us that Herod Agrippa was "pleased" to see Jesus at last, during the trials (see Luke 23: 7-12). Herod had executed *John the Baptist* (Mark 6: 17-29) and was apparently afraid that Jesus was the reincarnation of John! (Mark 6:14). Just as he had killed what he saw as the pesky moralist John, so Herod had a vested interest along with other civic authorities in *permanently* silencing this troublesome itinerant Galilean preacher and miracle worker.

The authorities were in a hurry! The night-time nature of the trial is reflected in these specific verses: Luke 22:66 tells us *"Then as it became daylight, the elders of the people gathered, both high priests and scribes, and they were leading Him away to their Sanhedrin."* Mark 15:1 says *'as soon as morning came'* they led Jesus to Pilate once the trial was concluded and an illegal sentence pronounced (an accused could not be convicted purely on their own testimony, i.e. on a confession, but this did not worry the authorities in their hurry!). Luke 22:71 appears to reflect the illegality of the trial as the *Sanhedrin*, having heard Jesus' affirmation that He is the Son of God, angrily demand *"what further need of witnesses do we have?"* They dispensed with the pesky legal need for further witnesses because they believed that

Jesus' affirmation was, in and of itself, completely damning. Luke 23:1 *also affirms: "Then after the whole multitude of them got up they led Him to Pilate"*. John 18:28 tells us:

"Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas to the praetorium: it was early".

We say no more here: the trial was an illegal one. It was a political trial, first and foremost – and it could have only one outcome.

What are we to make of all this?

The chart in this article aims to show how all these events 'fit together' in this momentous week and reconcile the seeming contradictions of the New Testament witnesses. However, it is fully possible to understand the wonderful truth of the crucifixion and resurrection, and of the concept of the penal substitution of *Yeshua* for all those who place their faith in Him, without becoming "experts" in the minutiae of the crucifixion events. **Yet it is undoubtedly faithbuilding and faith-sustaining to be able to see with perceptiveness how our wonderful and merciful God has accomplished these things, especially as foreshadowed so accurately in the OT Moedim!**

¹ *The Moedim* (holy convocations of Israel, commanded in Leviticus 23) are not well understood today. Yet these seven feasts each speak uniquely of the life, mission, ministry, achievement and *parousia* of the Lord Jesus. *Rosemary Bamber's "In Time With God"* is a useful introductory resource.

² *Christian Publications International*, due out in September 2018

³ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew – Rethinking the Historical Jesus Vol 1* (Doubleday, 1994) pp 40-46

⁴ There may have been in addition the Roman occupying calendar to consider! All the relevant calendars are considered in more detail in the book *"Three Days and Three Nights – that changed the world"* mentioned earlier.

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...a dead man for at least some months**