

The Historical Plausibility of John’s Passion Dating

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I. Introduction

The question of overall historicity of John’s gospel, as well as the historical value of specific material in the Fourth Gospel, rests on two concerns that always lurk behind the discussions in this SBL section on John, Jesus and History. The first is the foundational question of how we evaluate any of the gospels, or really any ancient writing, for “historical” material. That is, we must deal with the always contentious issues of the various criteria that we use to evaluate the gospel material’s historical value.¹ The second question which is crucial when we address material in the Fourth Gospel is simply the stark difference between John and the Synoptics.² One simply can not venture far into any consideration of John’s historical value without confronting the differences between John and the Synoptics (or indeed even non-

¹ It is not possible to even begin to be complete here, but the main criteria that are used by most scholars of the historical Jesus are addressed in brief fashion in John Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 1 (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 167–195. Also see Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), especially 90–124, and Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002). The bibliography is indeed extensive, but these serve as adequate pointers to the essential issues.

² This is also an impossibly large block of material to fully cite here. The best overall summary of the discussion in all its variations is found in D. Moody Smith, *John Among the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). This is such an essential starting point in any historically critical study of John that all major commentaries address it and reach at least a starting hypothesis. See, for instance, Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1966), xxiv–xlvii; *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 2003), 90–114; Rudolf Schnackenberg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, Volume 1 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 26–43.

canonical gospels), while also considering the similarities in content and overall structure that John shares with the other gospels. These two issues will, of course, find their way in repeated manifestations in the discussion that follows.

With respect especially to the latter issue of John's relationship to synoptics, one could reasonably suggest that the historical value of John might be best evaluated precisely where there is the greatest tension with the Synoptic Gospels. Granted, there is great value in comparing similar material. Does, for instance, John's account of the feeding of the five thousand in John 6 offer any critical insight into the historical tradition that might lie behind both the Johannine or the synoptic account? There is also value in examining thematic similarities or common forms between John and the Synoptics. Does John's extended and multi-faceted use of sheep and shepherd imagery in John 10 share similarities with the Synoptics' parables, and how might that comparison shed light on Jesus' historical use of parables or parabolic material? But in an evaluation of the historical value of John, that material which stands in stark difference from the synoptic gospels has a special place. It exposes John either to the charge that the material has been created or altered deliberately by the author, perhaps with a theological interest, or that the Fourth Gospel presents a significantly different tradition that casts an independent perspective with which to compare the synoptic and non-canonical depictions for historical value. That particular subset of distinctive material in John which is so close to the Synoptics, and yet so different, intrigues me most, for here it is very difficult to avoid the "either/or" question, and the historical questions are intensified. Given, then, this particular interest in those narrative units in John and the Synoptics which bear a strong similarity and yet disagree on critical points, it

should come as no surprise that I have previously been interested in John’s temple incident, often called a “cleansing,” which is at least chronologically in direct conflict with the Synoptic gospels.³

In this paper I focus on another comparison of material in which it appears there are glaring factual differences between John and the Synoptics contained in material that can generally be considered as comparable. Specifically I want to explore the question of the dating of the passion generally, and especially the final supper and Jesus’ death, relative to the Passover celebration. To briefly summarize the issue at stake, it is hard if not impossible to reconcile the dating of the last supper and the crucifixion – and thus the entire passion dating – between John and the Synoptics. For the Synoptic gospels, Jesus’ final supper is on a Thursday evening which, importantly, happens to be the first evening of Passover, Nisan 14.⁴ Mark’s gospel makes explicit reference to the Passover dating early in the Passion narrative. Beginning in Mark 14:1 the hints of a looming arrest are expressed as occurring “two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened bread.” And Mark’s narrative of the last supper itself begins with the second, and more explicit, reference to the Passover date: the disciples ask about preparations because it is “the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is

³ See Mark A. Matson, “The Contribution to the Temple Cleansing by the Fourth Gospel” in *SBL Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 489–506; and “The Temple Incident: An Integral Element in the Fourth Gospel’s Narrative,” in *Jesus in Johannine Tradition: New Dimensions* (ed. Robert Fortna and Tom Thatcher; Louisville, Westminster / John Knox Press, 2001), 145–154.

⁴ So following the biblical dating, see Lev 23:4-8: the Passover lamb is offered on the 14th, and the Feast of Unleavened Bread begins on the 15th (see also Num 28:16-17).

sacrificed” (Mark 14:12). What follows then is a narrative description of the preparation for a Passover meal: the disciples being sent to locate the upper room, a projected dialogue with the owner of the upper room about the desire to “eat the Passover” (τὸ πάσχα μετὰ τῶν μαθητῶν μου φάγω, Mark 14:14), and preparations for a “Passover” are all alluded to. The final meal that is eaten by Jesus and the disciples is patterned somewhat after the Passover (absent any reference to a lamb), and thus the eucharistic language is based to a great extent upon the structure of this meal.

In contrast, John’s gospel presents a final meal that has only vague references to what could be discerned as a Passover feast and is absent of the eucharistic language (it being replaced with the footwashing scene and subsequent interpretation and instructions); the meal generally does not resemble the Synoptics’ account except in the barest of points which they would share with almost any meal. Moreover, and more importantly, the Fourth Evangelist then goes on to explicitly mark out the chronological progression of the final days so that there is little question that the final meal was not Passover, but rather must have been celebrated the day before Passover, that is, on Nisan 13. John’s account in John 13:1 begins with the overall chronology of the final meal with the reference to this taking place “before the Passover” (πρὸ δὲ τῆς ἑορτῆς τοῦ πάσχα). More explicitly, at the trial before Pilate the high priests are unwilling to enter the Praetorium to prosecute Jesus’ trial because it might make them unclean, for they had not yet celebrated the Passover (John 18:28). Moreover, Jesus is finally condemned to crucifixion at noon (6th hour) of the “Preparation day of the Passover” (John 19:14). Thus in John’s chronology, Jesus is crucified on

Nisan 14, at approximately at the same time that the Passover lambs were being sacrificed in the temple (that is at just before evening of the 14th).

In the events leading up to and including Jesus' death, then, we are confronted with a stark choice of alternate chronologies, which from a historical perspective one must address rather directly: which, if either, of the depictions has a better claim to historical basis? It will be the thesis of this paper that John's chronology has at least as good a claim to being historically accurate, and when taken as a whole, a better case can be made for the historical plausibility of John's chronology than for the Synoptics' chronology. This conclusion does not come from any single new issue, but rather from the accumulation of all the data that relates to the dating of the last supper and crucifixion.

II. Is There a Conflict?

In the sketch offered above, the differences between the Johannine and Synoptic chronologies surrounding the last supper and crucifixion were emphasized. But at least some evangelical scholars have asserted that there is no significant difference between the accounts. For instance it is asserted that John's account of the final meal can easily be understood as a Passover meal, since it bears many of the same marks of the synoptic meal.⁵ Attempts to

⁵ An example would be the treatment in Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 187-88, in which the final supper announced in John 13:1 is the Passover, and that references in John 18:28 really are referring to the Feast of Unleavened Bread. A similar line of reasoning is found, for instance in Kostenberger's commentary *John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 401-2, 524. But this is not new. Charles Torrey had effectively argued that in 1931 in an article in *JBL* ("The Date of the Crucifixion According to the Fourth Gospel" *JBL* 50(1931): 227-241). And much of Torrey's argumentation begins with the assumption that John and his audience "knew" (and accepted) the previous synoptic accounts, and so that knowledge is presupposed as a beginning

reconcile John and the synoptics are not new. However, I find these efforts at harmonization unconvincing. Especially with reference to John, these features would seem to rule out a connection of the last supper with a paschal celebration: (a) the absence of any specific eucharistic language or any figurative value attached to the meal elements, (b) the reference at 13:1 that the meal took place “before” the Passover. Moreover, one also must explain the quite explicit reference to the relative dating of Jesus trial before Pilate: John 18:28 says it took place before the Passover. And yet here also a harmonization is attempted. Blomberg argues that the reference in 18:28 to “eating the Passover” in the future is referring to the entire Feast of Unleavened Bread, not to Passover itself.⁶ But this does not adequately explain why the Priests would go to great lengths to avoid ritual defilement for the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Surely this is best explained by their need to be present in the temple to sacrifice the Passover lambs, not some generalized concern for purity over the entire Feast of Unleavened Bread. Each of the items listed above might be explained away. But the problem for those who would argue that John and the Synoptics can be reconciled on the passion dating must explain all of them together. And taken together, these features add up to a compelling argument that John and Synoptics simply do not agree on the date of the final meal or the crucifixion of Jesus.

As a starting point, then, I would assert that it is very difficult if not impossible to

point.

⁶ Blomberg, 237-38. For Torrey also, the words φάγωσιν τὸ πάσχα in John 18:28 and παρασκευη τοῦ πάσχα in 19:14 refer not to the Passover meal itself, but to the feast of unleavened bread. A similar perspective is presented a half century later by Cullen I.K. Story, “The Bearing of Old Testament Terminology on the Johannine Chronology of the Final Passover of Jesus,” *NovT* 31 (1989): 316–324.

reasonably reconcile the Johannine and the synoptic accounts. John and the synoptic gospels do not agree on the date of the last supper, and as a result they portray very different supper emphases: the synoptic gospels center around a Passover feast, in which some of the elements of the feast (bread and wine) are interpreted proleptically as memorials of Jesus' death. But in John's gospel, the last supper is the day before the Passover meal, Nisan 13. The meal is not eucharistic in focus, since it was a normal group meal, and instead the focus is on the footwashing as an example of service. The dating cannot be reconciled, and it is this difficulty which underscores the importance of this question for a historical concern.

III. Governing Assumptions

Before commencing to actually argue the case, though, in true post-modern fashion (which seems strangely out of place in a section devoted to assessing historical value) it is appropriate to present a few comments about some assumptions which I bring to my analysis of this issue. These assumptions, or at least biases, will undoubtedly influence my evaluation of material and presentation, despite any attempt to be objective:

1. *Independence of John.* The question of John's relationship to the Synoptic Gospels has been actively debated for decades now, especially since Gardner-Smith and Windisch raised serious questions to the assumptions of Johannine posterity and dependence on the synoptics. It is, in my opinion, easier to explain the modest number of points of contact between John and Synoptics that are often pointed to as requiring a literary relationship in terms of commonalities in tradition, than it is to overcome the extreme difficulty which the many substantial differences between John and the Synoptics present to one seeking to explain them under a theory of literary

dependence.

2. *Possible Primary Nature of John.* If we conclude that John is independent, then any inherent assumptions about the late dating for the Fourth Gospel fall away. Developmental approaches that find John’s “high Christology” are, for instance, speculative. Very substantial explanations for the both the prologue and the discourse-controversies in John can be found in Wisdom Literature and Jewish understanding of agency.⁷ This is not to say that John is necessarily early, but rather that the dating must remain an open question. And as such, the material in John *may* be a primary source for Jesus material.

3. *All Gospels are Theological.* A frequent way to read John is as a thoroughly theological document, and thus to consider the representations in the Fourth Gospel as historically suspect. John is a thoroughly theological document. But so are the other gospels. Simply put, John is not inherently any more suspect by virtue of its theological agenda than the synoptic gospels.

With these caveats in mind, my examination of the historical value of John’s presentation of the passion chronology will proceed along the following course: First I will look at any external evidence of the various chronological arguments. Here I will consider the issue of the calendar itself, as well as references in other early documents, a comparison of very early eucharistic liturgies, and the evidence that might be adduced from the quartodeciman

⁷ For instance an excellent study on the issue of agency seen in the perspective of Jewish thought is found in James McGrath, *John’s Apologetic Christology*, SNTSMS (Cambridge: University Press, 2001); and John Ashton, “The Transformation of Wisdom: A Study of the Prologue of John’s Gospel,” *NTS* 32 (1986): 161–186, nicely places the prologue within wisdom speculation.

controversy. I will then turn to more internal evidence, and specifically the internal consistency of John's account and the synoptics accounts of the dating. And finally I will consider all of this in a more universal consideration of the overall plausability of John's dating.

IV. External Evidence for John's Chronology.

A. Calendrical Arguments

The rather stark contrast between John and the Synoptics in the reckoning of the last supper according to the Jewish calendar (i.e. Nisan 13 versus 14) suggests at the outset some particular issue peculiar to the Jewish calendar. After all, the two accounts do agree on the same day of the week – the last supper in both is a Thursday evening, the crucifixion on Friday, and the resurrection is discovered on Sunday morning after the Sabbath has passed. And thus a solution, it has been thought, can be found by reference to features or peculiarities of the Jewish calendar. Perhaps the most noted of these is the argument mounted by A. Jaubert shortly after the discovery of the Qumran scrolls.⁸ Her argument was that the disjuncture of dates between John and the Synoptics was due to two different calendar systems: one followed by the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem, and one followed by Jesus. Specifically, the argument held that Jesus followed an Essene 364-day solar calendar (an older reckoning of the Passover), such that Passover was celebrated on a different day than the calendar reckoned by the new moons of the lunar calendar which the Jewish hierarchy used (the newer reckoning of Passover).

⁸ A. Jaubert, "The Calendar of Qumran and the Passion Narrative in John" in *John and Qumran*, ed. James Charlesworth (London: Chapman, 1972) 62–75; A. Jaubert, *The Date of the Last Supper* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1965). See also E. Ruckstuhl, *Chronology of the Last Days of Jesus* (New York: Desclee Co., 1965).

Certainly this has some attractive qualities in that it explains two very different ways of explaining the date of Passover. But scholarly consensus has generally not pursued this proposal for some important reasons. The first reason is that it is based on speculation that Jesus would have followed an Essene calendar, without much, if any, evidence of this. While we do have reason to think that the Essenes at Qumran had a conflict with the temple authorities in part over calendrical disputes,⁹ no such traces of Jesus' direct connection with the Essenes, or more importantly any calendrical disputes, can be found in any sources dealing with Jesus.

Jaubert's argument is complex, but is based in part on John's interest in a subsequent meeting with the disciples eight days after the first resurrection appearances (John 20:26, καὶ μεθ' ἡμέρας ὀκτώ) and this eight-day reckoning links up with the Essenes reckoning for the counting for the celebration of Weeks following Passover. Thus, this eighth-day reference is a hint at another calendrical system that counts feast days differently than the major Jewish dating system in the gospel.¹⁰

The core of Jaubert's thesis is that Jesus' last supper celebration followed on an older calendar, the Essene calendar, according to which Passover is actually on Tuesday night. And

⁹ There is substantial evidence that, according to the Qumran documents, there was a conflict between the Teacher of Righteousness and the Wicked Priest concerning festal dates. Peshar Habakkuk in particular refers to such a conflict with the Day of Atonement. Other texts at Qumran make comments about Israel's error with respect to sacred times. So there was a substantial conflict. How widespread the conflict was, and whether the solar calendar had once been a major Jewish calendar system is very hypothetical. See for instance the summary comments in James VanderKam, *Calendars in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (London, Routledge, 1998) 115-116.

¹⁰ Jaubert, "Qumran Calendar," 63-64.

the remark in John that on Friday the Passover had not yet been sacrificed is also correct, since the Chief Priests in this account held the Passover according to a Pharisaic, but not the Zadokite (Essene), calendar. So, Jaubert posits:

Jesus celebrates the Pasch on *Tuesday evening, the eve of the Pasch*, according to the *old* priestly calendar.

He is arrested in the night between Tuesday and Wednesday

He dies on *Friday, 14 Nisan, the eve of the Pasch*, according to the *official* calendar.

The old Pasch and official Pasch would accordingly, have been celebrated that year at a distance of three days from one another. ...

According to this explanation, then, *the Synoptic Gospels* preserved a primitive tradition corresponding to a Palestinian catechesis. In such a context, the Pasch celebrated by Jesus could be that of the old calendar. Explanations were, therefore superfluous.¹¹

There are some problems with Jaubert's thesis. In the first place, while the Jesus' actual practice as reported in the Synoptics is said to be following an old Essene calendar, which is assumed without comment, nonetheless the Synoptic representation is still different. To make this work, Jaubert must create a space of three days between the Last Supper and the crucifixion. She must, then, amend the synoptic gospels' presentation. Moreover, while she bases much of this on hints in the Gospel of John (i.e. John 20:26 ff noted above), she also recognizes that John is constructed around festivals in Jerusalem, and that these betray little awareness of a calendrical conflict. Her view requires, then, that all the gospels – John and the Synoptics, have been edited to conform now to the dominant Jewish calendar, although John and the Synoptics each do this in different ways. And in this process, any reference to a calendrical dispute is

¹¹ Jaubert, *Date of Last Supper*, 97

removed. Moreover, when we add the lack of clear evidence in the gospels' text to any such dispute to her need to actually revise the chronology as presented in the gospels to make the system work, it seems to fail the simple test of reasonableness.

Another calendrical approach to resolving the conflict in chronology is by attempting to show by means of a projection of the Jewish calendar which date, Johannine or Synoptic, is the most probable to have occurred within the window of time we think Jesus must have died. This approach has been broached most favorably in J.A.T. Robinson's, *The Priority of John*, and with great caution in Joseph Blinzler's, *The Trial of Jesus*.¹²

The core of this approach lies in the fact that we now have the fairly sophisticated ability to predict the congruence of the lunar calendar against a projection of our current solar calendar for any period in the past, certainly the first century. It is now relatively simple to know which dates, according to our current calendar system, were new moons and full moons, and thus to determine the beginnings of lunar months in antiquity. If we then project the current Jewish lunar calendar backwards to the period of, say, 28 to 32 C.E., we theoretically should know which years Nisan 14 occurred on Thursdays and which on Fridays.

And this is precisely what J.A.T. Robertson does do, following astronomical calculations that were done by Parker and Dubberstein.¹³ According to these calculations, there are only

¹² J.A.T. Robinson, *The Priority of John*, (London: Meyer-Stone, 1985) 153–56; Joseph Blinzler, *The Trial of Jesus* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1959), 72–80.

¹³ J. A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John*, 153, citing here R.A. Parker and W. H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 636 BC –AD 75* (Providence: Brown University, 1956). Note also here similar results from K. Schoch “Christi Kreuzigung am 14.Nisan,” *Bib* 9 (1928):

three days in the period of 27-33 C.E. when Nisan 14 fell on either a Thursday or a Friday: on 27 C.E. it fell on a Thursday, on 30 C.E. it fell on a Friday, and on 33 C.E. it fell on a Friday. A similar calculation is noted by Blinzler.¹⁴ And indeed Jeremias, who strongly argues for a Passover feast underlying the last supper, concedes that for the most part the data supports the Johannine date, though he suggests that the data on the timing of first sightings of the moon might be incomplete.¹⁵ With those who cite astronomical calculations, then, the conclusion is usually in favor of the Johannine chronology, since 27 C.E. is and often regarded as being too early for Jesus' death. For instance Blinzler concludes: "Hence, we find that the trial and crucifixion of Jesus very probably took place in the year 30, and presumably on the fourteenth of Nisan."

In all of the discussions which use astronomy to attempt to calculate the date of the crucifixion in terms of a lunar Jewish calendar, there are cautionary notes appended, usually dealing with the possible variation of first sighting of a moon. But despite this, there is a certain confidence in the ability to calculate dates in the first century according to astronomical tables. Roger T. Beckwith, however, very appropriately adds an even greater caution to this whole

48–56, and J. K. Fotheringham "The Evidence of Astronomy and Technical Chronology for the Date of the Crucifixion," *JTS* 35 (1934): 146–62.

¹⁴ Blinzler, 77.

¹⁵ Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (3rd ed., London: SCM, 1966) 41, but see extended discussion on calendrical issues pages 36–41. See also the discussion of Jeremias in Blinzler, 78.

effort, one that clouds the whole endeavor.¹⁶ Simply put, the actual practice of the addition of leap months in antiquity creates so much variability in the calendar that a strictly astronomical approach is meaningless. If leap months were inserted in a formulaic way, the calculation of dates in antiquity would be relatively straightforward. But substantial evidence shows that, despite having a theoretical knowledge of when new moons appear, Jewish practice in the first century valorized actual sightings by priests, and even these sightings were mediated by subjective decisions about whether the new moon is sighted too early relative to the seasons. That is, the purpose of the intercalation is to adjust the lunar calendar to the solar, but the determination of “spring” in the solar calendar was based on such issues as the maturity of the grain harvest and the fatness of lambs as being equally important to the dating of the spring equinox.¹⁷ Such subjective variables about when intercalated months were added, the potential even of two back-to-back intercalated months, and even some controversy over the length of the intercalated months (a lunar month, based on sighting, or even fixed at 29 days or 30 days), all mean that it is really impossible to calculate accurately when Nisan 14 fell in the period of Jesus’ death.¹⁸

The use of chronology, then, provides almost no help in resolving the conflict that exists between John and the Synoptics relative to the chronology of the passion week. Any resolution

¹⁶ Roger Beckwith, “Cautionary Notes on the Use of Calendars and Astronomy to Determine the Chronology of the Passion,” in *Chronos, Kairos and Christos* (ed. J. Vardaman and E. Yamauchi; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1989), 183–205. See also R. Beckwith, *Calendar and Chronology, Jewish and Christian* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 276–289.

¹⁷ See *t. Sanh.* 2.2 and *b. Sanh* 11b.

¹⁸ See especially Beckwith’s historical data on these at 194–5.

must come from other considerations

B. Evidence from Sources Other than the Four Gospels

The issue of John's passion chronology affects the relationship between the Jewish Passover feast and the two major twin events of the final supper and the crucifixion. If John is correct, the last supper was not a Passover meal, since Jesus was crucified in the afternoon of the Passover eve. Alternately, if the Synoptics chronology is correct, the final supper was indeed a Passover meal, and thus the crucifixion must have happened on the day after Passover.

Is there any external attestation to either of these dating systems outside of the canonical gospels? As has been well documented over a number of years, we do have evidence to support various chronological schemes in other early sources that might provide some external evidence on the question.

1. 1 Corinthians. Since our issue involves Jesus' last supper and the possible origination of the eucharist memorial, a key 'external' source to examine would be Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In 1 Cor. 11:23–26, Paul passes on his tradition that Jesus "on the night he was betrayed" instituted a memorial feast. The language is relatively close to that found in the Synoptic gospels. A close analysis of the language of the various passages, while it will demonstrate some variants in the textual traditions, generally shows strong affinities with both Mark's version and Luke's longer version.¹⁹ It is notable for our discussion of passion

¹⁹ One view of the relationship between Paul and the gospels on the eucharist can be found in Hans Lietzmann, *Mass and Lord's Supper* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979) 172–187, 204–215. For another discussion on the relationship between 1 Cor 11 and Luke 22, see Mark Matson, *In Dialogue With Another Gospel*, (SBLDS; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2001), 180-184.

chronology that Paul does not refer to the Passover in his introduction to the Eucharistic pattern, but rather dates this somewhat elliptically with “on the night he was betrayed.” Does Paul not know this was a Passover feast? Does the feast indeed reflect the Passover itself?²⁰ While it is highly possible that Paul understood this initiating “remembrance meal” as a Passover meal, and that it had some patterns based on this meal, this cannot be asserted with certainty, and the lack of direct language to a Passover in the “words of institution” may well reflect a different tradition from which he is drawing. And indeed in light of 1 Cor. 5 (see below), any overly firm conclusion about Paul’s identification of the Last Supper with Passover could be questioned.

In the same letter of Paul, there is another reference to the Passover which may reflect a tradition closer to John than that found in the Synoptics. In 1 Cor. 5: 7–8, Paul does use extensive Passover terminology:

Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Granted, this passage does not address specifically the chronology of the crucifixion, or a specific reference to the last supper. But in its “occasional” reference to Jesus as the paschal lamb, cast within a discussion that draws on unleavened-bread typology, we find a common tradition that saw Jesus linked to the lamb sacrificed on Nisan 14. The whole passage is tied to

²⁰ Of course Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, argues strongly that it is patterned after the Passover meal. But see alternatively Eduard Schweizer, *The Lord’s Supper According to the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 29–32, for serious questions about this. Especially note that the bread and wine would have been standard parts of any meal, and thus need not be specific to a Passover meal.

the central symbolism of the Passover feast (here with the paschal lamb and unleavened bread bound together in one image). And the readers are assumed or urged to celebrate a Passover feast, which presumes also a knowledge and appreciation for this Jewish feast. Within the context of a Passover feast celebration, then, it is interesting that Jesus is typified as the “paschal lamb.”²¹ This may be, of course, simply an attempt at interpretation by analogy. But it is also very likely that underlying this reference is a tradition that Jesus died as symbolic Passover lamb, an idea which would be more difficult to develop if his death occurred the day after the Passover slaughter.

2. Talmud. One of the few passages concerning Jesus in the *baraitot* of the Talmud addresses the chronological issue of Jesus’ crucifixion. The passage in b. Sanh. 43a reads:

On the eve of the Passover, Yeshu (the Nazarean)²² was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place a herald went forth and cried ‘He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Anyone who can say anything in his favor, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.’ But since nothing was brought forward in his favor, he was hanged on the eve of the Passover.

While caution must certainly be applied to evaluating material from the Talmud, especially because of its remoteness from the time and the tendentious nature of much of it, this particular baraita seems to have originated independently, and points to an early tradition about

²¹ Note that the text says only that Jesus is our pascha. But since the verb used is θύω, it is appropriate to translate pascha as “passover lamb.”

²² Only one manuscript, the Munich manuscript, inserts the words “the Nazarean.” It is probably a later addition, but suggests that interpreters clearly saw this baraita as referring to Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus' crucifixion.²³ If it is a witness to an independent early tradition, it might inform our inquiry into the independence and historical value of the Johannine dating. In support of the baraita referenced above, we might note that the representation of Jesus as “practicing sorcery” and “enticing Israel to apostasy” both fit within the gospels' representation of the reasons for the Jewish opposition to Jesus, at least to the degree that Jewish opponents of Jesus might have phrased the accusations against him. It is interesting also that while the rather self-serving notice of the 40 day notice and request for exculpatory evidence indicates that stoning would be the result of the charge (the time delay would not, incidentally, cause problems to John's chronology, since only in the Fourth Gospel does the Jewish “trial” take place earlier than passion week, cf. John 11: 47–53), the baraita nonetheless concludes that *hanging* was the mode of execution. It is possible, of course, that what is envisaged is death by stoning to be followed by a public humiliation by hanging. But whether there is a discrepancy in the method of execution in this passage, or the public hanging is a humiliation after death, the passages seems to retain information about Jesus' crucifixion which would not have served later Jewish interests. If this *baraita* has any claim to deriving from an early period in the Jewish memory of Jesus, and I think that it has a strong claim to that, it does suggest clearly that Jesus was crucified (or hung) on the day before the Passover, or Nisan 14, in agreement with John's gospel.

²³ In particular Joseph Klausner, who is generally skeptical of most references that might be to Jesus in the rabbinic sources, nonetheless finds this one to have some relative historical value. Thus see Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth* (NY: Macmillan, 1926), 27–28, in which he also makes a big distinction between the baraita on Jesus' execution and one that follows that supposedly deals with his disciples. Less sanguine on the historical value is Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 96–97. cf also Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 74–76.

3. Gospel of Peter. The fragment of the Gospel of Peter has been generally judged to be independent of the canonical gospels. The historical value of the material has received varied assessments.²⁴ But it is fair to say that there is at least broadly accepted to be relatively early and independent of the canonical gospels.

In the early part of the extant fragment of the Gospel of Peter, at the conclusion of the trial scenes (which, interestingly, have Herod actually sending Jesus to his death), Pilate and Herod consent to give Joseph the body of Jesus for burial. And as Herod consents, saying that he would have buried him anyway in order to avoid violating the Deut 21:22-23, the narrator makes a generalizing comment: “And he turned him over to the people on the day before the Unleavened Bread, their feast (πρὸ μιᾶς τῶν ἀζύμων τῆς εορτῆς αὐτῶν).” Here the first day of unleavened bread must certainly be the passover celebration, and thus G. Peter knows of a chronology similar to John. If we follow Koester and allow for this to be an indication of an early independent tradition, then we have a second clear attestation for a chronology in which Jesus at least does not celebrate the Last Supper on the evening of Passover, but rather is put to death on the day of Passover, Nisan 14.

C. Indirect Evidence: Early Church Practices

²⁴ On the positive side, see John Dominic Crossan, *The Cross that Spoke* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), especially page xiii which anticipates the conclusions reached throughout his book; and Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990), 216-40. While he thinks Crossan’s claim that the canonical gospels used G. Peter as a source is too speculative, Koester affirms that the Gospel of Peter is independent and most original in its passion scenes. See alternatively, Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 50, who generally dismiss its historical value, and Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 116-17, who dismisses it as dependent on the canonical gospels.

While the references in 1 Corinthians, Gospel of Peter, and the Talmud provide some external evidence of varying quality, there is some further evidence in the development of the eucharistic and Easter practices that might also suggest the independent and early use of the passion dating tradition found in John. Of course this could mean simply that segments of the church knew the Gospel of John and were influenced at an early stage to follow its practice or theology. But it could also suggest that segments of the early church and John both relied on an early tradition, and this independent early tradition would thus add another datum in favor of the historical value of such a tradition. What follows, then, is a consideration of a variety of evidence that the early church followed a tradition similar to John.

1. The *Didache* on the Eucharist. The striking aspect of John's presentation of Jesus' final week, as noted before, is that his final supper is not a Passover and that the last meal does not contain any language later identified with the eucharist. In all of the other gospels, the final meal is represented as a Passover meal, and the words over the bread and cup establish the basis for a later memorial meal. While it is not absolutely necessary that there be a linkage between the "words of institution" of the Lord's Supper and the Passover, the sacrificial metaphor of the body given (most clearly in Luke) and blood poured out "for others" seems to fit very well within a Passover setting.²⁵ And certainly in the synoptic gospels this metaphor is used proleptically for the upcoming passion of Jesus, so that the bread and cup come, on reflection, to symbolize Jesus' body "given up" in death on the cross. The Johannine version of eucharistic language in John 6, in contrast, uses the giving of manna as the entry point for identifying Jesus' body as "true

²⁵ As, of course, Jeremias argues; *Eucharistic Words*, especially 41–88.

food.” And by the very nature of the setting within John’s gospel (early in the narrative), it is not associated with Jesus’ death, even though it suggests the participants must “eat my flesh” and “drink my blood.” Of course it is equally intriguing that John 6 is situation calendrically in John as taking place near the Passover, and that the manna reference linked to the body to be eaten is part of the larger Exodus/Passover narratives which were recalled during Passover.

In the *Didache* we have an important witness to the early traditions of the eucharist. Many see chapter 9 of the *Didache* as presenting a substantially independent tradition within the early church, with a quite independent approach to theological grounding of the eucharist. Niederwimmer suggests that chapter 9 of the *Didache* is not eucharistic, but rather simply records prayers before an agape meal, and the eucharist proper is alluded to in chapter 10.²⁶ On the other hand, however, both Vööbus and Milavec have argued persuasively and I think correctly that the *Didache* in chapters 9 and 10 present a eucharist that does not yet know of a formal separation between the sacramental rite and the agape meal.²⁷ Given that the *Didache* probably dates to the first century, and seems to derive foundationally from independent Jewish traditions, it is probable that we have a truly independent witness to early church practice and one if its perspectives.²⁸

²⁶ Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 142–43.

²⁷ Aaron Milavec, *The Didache* (New York: Newman Press, 2003), 379–80, following Arthur Vööbus, *Liturgical Traditions in the Didache* (Stockholm: Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1968). See also on this issue John Riggs, “The Sacred Food of Didache 9–10 and Second Century Ecclesiologies,” in *The Didache in Context* (ed. Clayton N. Jefford; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 256–283 (though I don’t entirely agree with his trajectory).

²⁸ cf. Niederwimmer, *The Didache*, 52–54 and Aaron Milavec, *The Didache* 695–739, who represent a broad consensus on the issue of dating.

The eucharistic liturgy presented in this early document does not utilize the passion of Jesus as its metaphorical reference point. Instead, the wine (τὸ ποτήριον) is connected to the “holy vine of your son David, which you made known to us through your son Jesus.” (Did. 9:2) And the “broken” bread (τὸ κλάσμα; not ἄρτος) symbolizes not the body of Jesus imagined through the eyes of the passion story, but instead it represents the unity of the church: “As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains, and being gathered together became one, so my your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.” (Did 9:4) Thus, the celebration of the eucharist is seemingly not grounded in the passion of Jesus, and possibly may not even have a connection to the Passover, but rather is based on a tradition which connects Jesus’ body to the church.²⁹

What makes this interesting for our consideration of John’s passion dating, then, is the fact that we have represented here an early tradition in which the eucharist is not linked to the last supper or to the passion. And this is, as previously pointed out, what we have in the Gospel of John, where eucharistic-type language is found associated with the feeding of the 5000, early in the ministry of Jesus and not connected to the passion narrative. Let me be clear, though. I am not suggesting here that the *Didache* is in any way dependent on the Fourth Gospel, although there are some broad symbolic points of similarity. While this has been suggested previously, I

²⁹ Of course here we find parallels in 1 Cor. 10:17, although Paul still links it to the death of Jesus even while he uses “one body” language also. Of course John also links the bread to the church by means of the mystical identification with Jesus: “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” (John 6:56) where “abiding” is John’s later language for the bond that keeps His spirit connected to the church.

think this direct connection cannot be sustained.³⁰ But that does not take away from its value as a witness to the relative plausability of John's account, or at least a narrative account in which the passion and eucharist precursor language are disconnected. For here, in an independent and early witness to church tradition, we have a eucharist that is not grounded for its meaning in the passion, and it thus testifies to a variety of traditions, some of which did not fundamentally link the passion and the eucharist.³¹

2. The Quartodeciman Practices. One early controversy in the church dealt with the worship and liturgy on the occasion of the remembrance of Jesus' death and resurrection. The controversy, called the quartodeciman controversy, is recorded in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*,³² and deals primarily with the Roman Bishop Victor's mandate to the churches in Asia to stop celebrating the Jewish Passover because it was a "heterodox" practice. It is clear from the introduction to the controversy that the churches in Asia focused on Nisan 14 as a central part of their celebration of Jesus' death and resurrection:

At that time no small controversy arose because of the dioceses of Asia thought it right, as though by a more ancient tradition, to observe for the feast of the Saviour's passover the fourteenth day of the moon, on which the Jews had been commanded to kill the lamb. Thus it was necessary to finish the fast on that day,

³⁰ Arthur Vööbus, "Regarding the Background of the Liturgical Traditions in the Didache: The Question of Literary Relation between Didache IX,4 and the Fourth Gospel," *VC* 23 (1969): 81–87.

³¹ See Robert Richardson's added notes in Lietzmann's *Mass and Lord's Supper*, 377–406.

³² Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 5:23–25.

whatever day of the week it might be.³³

As Eusebius' discussion proceeds, it is apparent that this practice of the Asian churches is contrasted with the practice of the ending of the paschal *fast* on Easter, which was always a Sunday ('Lord's Day'). It is not obvious from Eusebius' description what specific kind of remembrance took place among the Asian churches: was it a substitute for Easter on the Passover? Or was it a continued celebration of the Jewish passover as opposed to (or in preference for) a Christian recognition of the resurrection? Or is Eusebius simply pointing to a conflict over passion dating with reference to the Jewish calendar? The Asian practice, whatever it precisely was, was vigorously defended by Polycrates.³⁴ And indeed Eusebius records that Irenaeus came to the defense of the Asian churches, not so much agreeing with their practice as asserting their right to practice it within a less monolithic concept of the developing catholic church.³⁵ Ultimately the dominant church did adopt the Roman tradition in the celebration of Easter.

The account in Eusebius is intriguing for a number of reasons. First, it appears that a substantial number of churches in Asia did keep the quartodeciman practice. "The dioceses in Asia (τῆς Ἀσίας ὅλης αἱ παροικίαι)" is a broad geographical identifier. Moreover, the reference to a plurality of bishops in Asia for whom Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, spoke would imply that there was a fairly extensive practice within the region. And Eusebius also notes in his

³³ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5:23.1, in Kirsopp Lake, *Eusebius: The Ecclesiastical History*, LCC (Cambridge Harvard University Press, 1965), 503.

³⁴ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 5:24.1–8.

³⁵ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 5:24.11–18.

introductory reference that he considered the practice to be ancient – ἀρχαιοτέρως. And in the bishops' response to the pressure to change, they also are described as defending an old tradition that had been handed down over time. Polycrates' response, quoted in Eusebius, cites the long chain of tradition by which this form of commemoration of Jesus death was passed down:

Therefore we keep the day undeviatingly, neither adding nor taking away, for in Asia great luminaries sleep ... Such were Philip of the twelve apostles, and two of his daughters who grew old as virgins, who sleep in Hierapolis, and another daughter of his, who lived in the Holy Spirit, rests at Ephesus. Moreover, there is also John, who lay on the Lord's breast, who was a priest wearing the breastplate and a martyr and teacher. He sleeps at Ephesus. And there is also Polycarp at Smyrna, both bishop and martyr, and Thraseas, both bishop and martyr, from Eumeneae, who sleeps in Smyrna. And why should I speak of Sagaris, bishop and martyr who sleeps at Laodicea, and Papius, took the blessed, and Melito the eunuch, who lies in Sardis waiting for the visitation from heaven when he will rise from dead. All these kept the fourteenth day of passover according to the gospel, never swerving, but following according to the rule of the faith.³⁶

What is clear from Polycrates' defense of the Asian churches' practice is that is linked to tradition that is traced all the way back to the disciples, including Phillip, one of the twelve (called an apostle in this reference), and John (who is not called an apostle, but is said to have been part of Jesus' group). And this John is linked by direct allusions to the author of the Fourth Gospel (cf. John. 13:23 and 21:20).³⁷ This reference to John, in terms that link it to the author of

³⁶ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 5:24.2–6. In Lake, 506–7.

³⁷ It is worth noting here Richard Bauckham's lengthy article, "Papias and Polycrates on the Origin of the Fourth Gospel" (*JTS* 44 (1993): 24–69) dealing with Polycrates' letter embedded in Eusebius, and how it might influence the debate on the authorship of the Gospel of John. He uses the evidence from Eusebius, together with traditions about Papias, to support Hengel's argument for authorship of the Fourth Gospel by the elder John, a disciple of Jesus. See also Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1989).

the Fourth Gospel, is itself indicative of a deeper connection between the quartodeciman practice and the Fourth Gospel and its passion chronology. In Eusebius' discussion it is also worth briefly examining Irenaeus' defense of the Asian churches. While Irenaeus agrees with the Western practice of Easter as opposed to the Asian church practice, he does recognize that the Asian churches have had their pattern for a long time. In particular he notes that Polycarp (d. 156 C.E.) was adamant about the celebration on the 14th of Nisan "inasmuch as he had always done so in company with John the disciple of our Lord and the other apostles with whom he had associated."³⁸ Irenaeus seems to admit that an ancient but distinctive tradition was a valid reason to allow for variety in liturgical practice.

The scholarly discussion about what exactly the quartodeciman practices were, and how they might be related to the issue of gospel chronology, was an active one in the latter half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.³⁹ As noted above, a central question has been in defining precisely what significance the Asian churches attached to Nisan 14: was it a commemoration of the death of Jesus (in which case it relates directly to Johannine chronology), or was it a commemoration of the Last Supper (in which case it affirms the Synoptic chronology), or was it instead Jewish-Christian celebration of the Passover with only a few typological connections to the Passion (in which case the issue may have involved the strenght

³⁸ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5:24.16 in Lake, 511.

³⁹ See for instance, James Drummond, "The Fourth Gospel and the Quartodecimans," *American Journal of Theology* 1 (1897): 601–657; Cyril C. Richardson, "The Quartodecimans and the Synoptic Chronology," *HTR* 33 (1940): 177–190; Kenneth A. Strand, "John as Quartodeciman: A Reappraisal," *JBL* 84 (1965): 251–258. A major summary work was B. Lohse, *Das Passafest der Quartadecimaner* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1953).

of Jewish elements within Christianity). A major effort in this early discussion was the formulation by Carl Schmidt, based on scanty references in ancient literature to what the quartodeciman practice was:

- (a) The Quartodeciman observance of Nisan 14th celebrated the Passion.
- (b) This was in harmony with Johannine chronology.
- (c) Only one day, the 14th, was kept. The Asiatics fasted till the hour of death of Jesus, and later assembled for vigil which terminated at the cockcrow. This moment signified the end of the Passion festival, which the concluded with a Eucharist and Agape.⁴⁰

In contrast, however, Richardson suggested that the quartodecimans actually celebrated the Last Supper as Jesus' last Passover on Nisan 14, and that they thus were following a synoptic chronology rather than a Johannine chronology.

The discussion has been raised anew, however, aided by significant new material. In particular the Passover Liturgy of Melitto of Sardis, *Peri Pascha*, has been reconstructed through a series of manuscript discoveries.⁴¹ The publication of the reconstructed texts has been followed by an extensive examination of the *Peri Pascha* and the quartodeciman practices, notably a recent monograph by Alistair Steward-Sykes.⁴² In essence, Steward-Sykes has been

⁴⁰ As quoted on Cyril C. Richardson, "Quartodecimans and Synoptic Chronology," 178. This summarizes conclusions that Schmidt comes to in an excursus on the passover celebration in the Asian churches in his larger study of the *epistola apostolorum*, *Gespräche Jesus mit Seinen Jüngern* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1919), 577–725.

⁴¹ See the discussion on the discovery and identification of fragments of *Peri Pascha* in Stuart George Hall, *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha and Fragments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), xvii.

⁴² Alistair Steward-Sykes, *The Lamb's High Feast: Melito, Peri Pascha and the Quartodeciman Paschal Liturgy at Sardis*, (SuppVC; Leiden: Brill, 1998)

able to confirm Schmidt's conclusions cited above.⁴³ That is, the quartodeciman practice focused on Nisan 14 as the celebration of Christ's death, interpreting him as the paschal lamb. This celebration did also encompass the resurrection as a unified celebration of the larger passion mystery (including the death, resurrection, and anticipation of return as all elements of the passion), and the centrality of Nisan 14, understood as an "easter" type celebration, brought up the basic issue of the dating of the passion and led to the conflict with the Western tradition of celebrating Easter. It is clear that this quartodeciman practice was Johannine in its basic approach to the passion of Jesus, especially the chronology of the death of Jesus as it relates to the Jewish calendar and celebration of Passover.

Moreover, evidence of the extent to which the quartodeciman practice influenced the early church is also suggestive of the widespread nature of this tradition. As already indicated, Schmidt found the same emphasis in his examination of the *epistola apostolorum*. The Easter sermon by Pseudo-Hippolytus, εἰς τὸ ἅγιον πάσχα, is likely also to be quartodeciman in its outlook.⁴⁴ In other studies focused on the Syriac churches, there is strong evidence that the Syriac churches retained quartodeciman liturgies until the time of Nicea.⁴⁵ Specifically the writings of Ephrem the Syrian and Aphrahat show a similarity to Melito's *Peri Pascha*. It appears that the quartodeciman passion liturgy was fairly extensive in its reach. And this liturgy reflects a core narrative emphasis that, in the gospels, is found in John, not the Synoptics.

⁴³ See especially Steward-Sykes, 206.

⁴⁴ Pierre Nautin, ed., *Homélie Pascales* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1950).

⁴⁵ G. A. M Rouwhorst, "Jewish Liturgical Traditions in Early Syriac Christianity," *VC* 51 (1997): 82.

It is possible, of course, that all of these practices are simply the result of these churches choosing the Fourth Gospel over the Synoptics during the formative period in which this liturgy developed. But since at least Melito's *Peri Pascha* betrays little direct quotation of the Fourth Gospel, and yet shows strong similarity to its underlying mode of argumentation and chronology, I would argue that we may be seeing the pervasive influence of the Johannine tradition, not the Fourth Gospel itself, on the liturgies in Asia and Syria. Certainly that is what Polycrates suggests in his response to Victor, and it is also implied in Irenaeus' response. That liturgies might contain very old and stable traditions is suggested by Rouwhorst in his study of the Syriac liturgical traditions:

A second reason (for the special interest in early liturgies) is that the liturgy is of particular importance because of its communal character. Liturgical rituals are performed, not by individuals but communities, by groups of believers, even when one must allow for the fact that not all of them participate in a ritual with the same degree of involvement. Moreover, rituals are characterized by a certain stability; usually they are not invented all of a sudden and at least their basic structures are not so easily changed.⁴⁶

What the quartodeciman practice shows, and indeed this is true of the the liturgy in the Didache, is that there was an active liturgical tradition, especially in Asia Minor and Syria, which maintained a very different perspective to the Last Supper and the date of Jesus' death from the dominant "Western" liturgical traditions. These traditions are generally what could be called "Johannine."

V. Internal Evidence for John's Chronology.

⁴⁶ Rouwhorst, 73.

John's chronology, in which the last supper must have been eaten on Nisan 13, and the crucifixion of Jesus took place on Nisan 14, has often been criticized as a theological construction by the Fourth Evangelist, even a deliberate refashioning of the synoptic accounts. As C. K. Barrett has argued generally about John, but in a point which is especially emphasized with regard to the final meal and the passion:

It has already been shown that some of the historical differences between John and the Synoptic Gospels are not unrelated to John's theological interests. Indeed, if John knew the other gospels (or at least Mark) every serious divergence between them must mean either that John had fresh historical information, or, as is often more probable, wrote from a different point of view with a different intention. ... Again, the Johannine date of the last supper and crucifixion seems to be due to John's determination to make clear that Jesus was the true Paschal Lamb of God.⁴⁷

The question which Barrett's raises is whether there is evidence that John has shaped his chronology around the theological concern to portray Jesus as the paschal lamb.

A. Is John's Gospel Constructed Around Jesus as Paschal Lamb?

One might expect that John is constructing a central motif around the idea of Jesus as the Passover lamb. Certainly John focuses more attention on the Passover as a Jewish festival than the synoptics, both in the passion narrative and in the earlier material. It is noteworthy, of course, that John notes the Passover several times in Jesus' ministry: the temple "cleansing" in chapter two is set at the time of Passover (John 2:13, 23); and the feeding of the five thousand, and the related discourse on Jesus' flesh and blood as true food and drink, is set at a Passover time (6:4). And the Passion narrative is anticipated through a number of references to the

⁴⁷ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*. (2nd edition; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 51.

Passover: the order to arrest Jesus is given with the upcoming pilgrimage to Jerusalem at Passover in mind (11:55), the anointing at Bethany is specifically dated to “six days before Passover” (12:1), and the triumphal entry is linked to the “festival,” which can only mean the Passover (12:12, 12:20). And of course, the final meal in John is synchronized specifically as “before the feast of Passover,” which would appear to be an explicit attempt to place the meal chronologically before the beginning of the feast. And of course the trial before Pilate is explicitly linked to the Passover, since the priests stayed outside Pilate’s compound because they had not yet eaten the Passover (John 18:28). And finally, sentence of crucifixion is given on the “day of Preparation for Passover” (John 19:14). All of this points to John’s deep awareness of and attention to Passover.

And yet, if Barrett’s contention is correct that the Passion narrative is chronologically constructed so that Jesus is depicted as the Paschal Lamb of God, one might have expected that John would focus more attention to that central connection. Instead, no explicit comment is made during the Passion narrative that makes that logical connection.

Jesus’ final meal focuses almost exclusively on the betrayal (the morsel given to Judas) and the footwashing and its power as an example for the disciples. The issues that take place at the final meal are each presented with their own internal and self-consistent focus. There does not seem to be any hint or betrayal of an attempt to avoid Passover imagery or references. One might expect, if there is a theological effort to “refocus” attention from a Passover meal to something different, that some trace of such a replacement or redirection would be seen in John’s

dinner account. The absence of such a trace in the final meal leads Haenchen, who is quite willing to find traces of editorial manipulation in the gospel, to conclude “An old source lies behind this account, which is already related to the footwashing rather than the Passover meal. ...The alternative interpretation, that the story viewed him as the Passover lamb, is not hinted at in the Fourth Gospel.”⁴⁸

There are, to be sure, a number of references in John that would support Jesus as the Paschal lamb. The first is the announcement by John the Baptist before the baptism: “here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29). But this is problematic in that the Passover lamb was not considered an expiation for sin – it was not a sin or guilt sacrifice, but rather a festival sacrifice which had a uniquely celebratory role in Jewish collective thought. Perhaps a more important theological or scriptural source for the reference to the “lamb of God” would be the suffering servant imagery, seen most clearly in Isaiah 53:4–7.⁴⁹

Similarly, the reference at Jesus’ death that the guards did not need to break his legs so that the scripture might be fulfilled, “None of his bones shall be broken” (John 19:36), is often interpreted as referring to the Passover.⁵⁰ But this is not obvious either. The scriptural quotation is not a direct quotation that we know of, and Ex. 12:10, 12:46, Num 9:12 are often referred to as

⁴⁸ Ernst Haenchen, *John 2*. (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 105.

⁴⁹ Rudolf Schnackenberg, vol. 1, 297–300.

⁵⁰ So, for instance, the NOAB at 19:36 notes simply “Jesus fulfills the passover (Ex 12:46; 1 Cor 5:7).”

the source of such Passover imagery, but none of them is exactly the same as John.⁵¹ Equally possible, however, is the suffering servant typology as found in Psalm 34:20. In support of the latter, one should note that this suffering servant understanding of Jesus' passion had already been cited in closely preceding passages in John: John 19:24 (citing Ps. 22:18) and John 19:28 (citing Ps. 69:21). And this perspective would also fit closely with the subject of the other scriptural reference in this passage, Zech. 12:10, which also seems to refer a similar "righteous sufferer." Certainly, if John 1:29 also was referring to the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, we might see a consistent focus on this figure in John's passion account.

To be sure, the interpretation of the various scriptural references and allusions in John's passion narrative are not clear. As Schnackenberg points out: "The preference for one passage as against another [that is Ex 12:10 or 12:46 vs. Ps 34:20] is, for most scholars, dependent on what conception they see behind the passage: Passover lamb typology, or, protection for the suffering righteous."⁵² While one might see John as tendentiously creating the passion structure around the conceit of Jesus dying as the Passover lamb, it is equally possible – perhaps even more probable – to see John's primary theological interpretation of the crucifixion as focusing on Jesus as the suffering servant, a theme which would recommend substantial revision of our view of John's sources and tradition.

It would seem likely that if John were focusing on Jesus as a Paschal sacrifice, he would

⁵¹ Schnackenberg, *The Gospel According to John*, vol 3 (New York, Crossroad, 1990), 291.

⁵² Schnackenberg, 292.

be underlining or highlighting the similarities with the Passover, especially since John is at such variance with the synoptic tradition. John does have some explicit time markers in the Pilate trial and the crucifixion, and yet at the very best they only hint at a connection in time between the death of Jesus and the slaying of the Passover lambs. In John 18:28, Jesus is brought before Pilate early in the morning (πρωί). And then in John 19:14, Jesus is handed over for crucifixion at around noon, the sixth hour (ὥρα ἕκτη). This latter time is notably in conflict with Mark's time notations, which have Jesus crucified in the morning (15:25), and a deep darkness then covers the earth while Jesus is on the cross at the sixth hour, or noon (Mark 15:33). Perhaps John has moved his time period back in order for Jesus' death to take place at about the time of the slaying of the lambs, which would probably have been from 3 to 6 pm. But what is remarkable is that John has only these two early time markers, and then makes no reference to the time of Jesus' death. Again, the internal structure of John's account shows little apologetic interest in linking the Passover to Jesus' death. Or if such an apologetic interest is there, John is remarkably subtle in his presentation.

B. Is John's Account Consistent with Jewish Trial Practice?

We might note briefly also an external historical feature that would seem to affirm at the least John's consistency, and perhaps cause problems for the Synoptic chronology. Here I speak of the probability of Jesus' trial during a Passover time. This issue has two facets. The first is the question of legitimate jurisprudence— would Jewish law have allowed for a trial of Jesus on the eve of Passover or on Passover itself? Based on later Mishnaic regulations, it would seem

that any such Jewish trial would be difficult.⁵³ But of course John has no Jewish trial, at least not in the week before Passover. The closest thing to a Jewish trial mentioned in John is found in John 11:45–53. Here the council is called together with Caiaphas as high priest present, although Jesus is not present. And the result of this “formal” tribunal is that they planned to put Jesus to death. But of course this all happened some time before Jesus entry into Jerusalem in the week preceding the Passover. At least on the face of it, the regulations about Jewish trials on feast days would at the very least present an argument in favor of John’s consistency, if not the underlying historical plausability of the competing accounts.

Jeremias argues effectively that executions on feast days is not a problem, but the example he gives is of a person convicted of a major Jewish crime (e.g. idolator or false prophet) who is held until the Passover for public execution.⁵⁴ But of course that is not the case here, since according to the Synoptics Jesus was arrested and tried after the Passover meal had already started. Indeed, even here John comes closer to the example given if indeed the decision to have Jesus executed was made by a tribunal some days or weeks before Passover began (as John 11:45–53 suggests). Jeremias also argues that the prohibition against a trial during a major feast would have cut equally against John and the Synoptics; but, of course, that is not true either, since John has no Jewish trial in the Passover week.

But while an execution during Passover may be theoretically possible, it is difficult to

⁵³ See for instance the discussion in Lindars, 445, citing *m. Sanh* 6.1; but the Mishnah does not address this issue directly. See also Blinzler, 76.

⁵⁴ Jeremias, 78–79. See also Blinzler, 76.

imagine that this would have been politically likely. The possible reaction against a Roman execution on a day that was treated as a Sabbath would have been politically difficult. And, indeed, Mark's introduction to the arrest and trial contains the cautionary concern, "not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people." (Mark 14:2). But of course Mark's gospel then goes on to have Jesus executed after the Passover had begun. But John's gospel does not present this problem, since Jesus dies before the beginning of Passover, the evening of Nisan 14.

A similar issue of chronological likelihood is to be found in the release of Barabbas, a feature found in all the gospels. The idea of a customary release of a prisoner at Passover (as noted in Mark 15:6) only makes sense if the prisoner is released before the beginning of the Passover feast in order that he might join the celebration of the Passover with family.⁵⁵ Again, this natural situation makes little sense in the Synoptic presentation, since in each of them Barabbas would be freed after the Passover feast. But in John this chronological relationship of the freeing of a prisoner to the Passover feast itself is maintained.

In summary on the arguments from internal consistency, then, we have two issues which both support the plausibility of John's chronology:

a. While Jesus does die at approximately the same time as the Passover lamb in John, the Fourth Evangelist does not seem to emphasize that feature. Indeed problems remain if the motif

⁵⁵ Blinzer, 76–77; often *m. Pesach* 8.6 is cited, but the reference is quite vague: only really suggesting that a family might sacrifice a Passover lamb for one who is promised to come out of prison (along with a list of other people whose participation in Passover is questionable due to circumstances).

of Jesus “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” is connected with the Passover symbolism. It is this very lack of awareness of or emphasis on the connection between the death of Jesus and the simultaneous Passover sacrifices that gives John’s account some internal historical credibility, as opposed to it being a constructed theologic motif.

b. At the same time, it would appear that the Synoptic representation does present problems with the chronology of the trial and the release of Barabbas, while the Johannine chronology does not. A Jewish trial on the eve of Passover after the meal appears to violate Jewish law, an execution on Passover would seem ill-advised politically, and the release of Barabbas makes little sense after the Passover meal is eaten. In each case, however, the Johannine chronology makes more sense: Jesus would not be tried by the Jewish tribunal on Passover eve at any rate under Johannine chronology, but even so there is no Jewish trial in John (such a trial has been held days or weeks before), the execution takes place before Passover, and the release of Barabbas would also take place before the Passover meal. As a result, it would seem that our attention to a theologically constructed account should be directed at Mark rather than John. Perhaps Mark has revised his traditions on the passion, and certainly his chronology, given special importance to the Last Supper as a Passover? In this case, some of the internal inconsistencies may be due to Mark’s forcing the passion to fit a Passover-meal design.

VI. Conclusion.

As we have seen, the issue of passion chronology involves a myriad details which seem to be related to the dating of Jesus’ death and final supper. This is all fertile ground that has been frequently plowed before, producing fruit on various sides of the argument. And while one

can't "prove" the accuracy of John's passion dating, the large number of issues involved seem to point to John's dating as at least "plausible." Plausibility is a statement of probability, not fact. So to highlight some of the conclusions that we have reached along the way in terms of probability:

1. It is almost certain that John and the Synoptics relate two very different chronologies of Jesus' last supper and death relative to the Jewish calendar. Or to put it another way: it is highly improbable that John and the Synoptics can be harmonized on the date of Jesus' death.

2. While it would be nice to use astronomical calculations to certify the accurate chronology of Jesus' passion, that avenue seems to be a dead-end. On the face of it, it might appear that John's dating has a better chance of being accurate – astronomical constructions of the period around 30 CE seem to find few possible days when Passover eve was on a Thursday, but more possible days when Passover eve was on a Friday. Still, given the way calculations of new months and new years were actually performed, the whole issue is too uncertain to base a conclusion. It is highly improbable that we can resolve the date of Jesus' death by a retrojection of our modern calendars.

3. Almost certainly Jaubert's attempt to find two calendars as a way of reconciling the problem seems highly improbable. Not only is there no evidence externally or internally of competing calendars being involved in the Jesus' movement, but even her construction does not easily work without extensive modification of our all the gospel accounts.

4. Textual evidence outside the gospels themselves are not clear cut, but seem to provide some support for the Johannine chronology. While the eucharistic language in 1 Cor. 11

apparently points to a Passover connection to the final meal, Paul also thinks of Jesus' himself as the Passover sacrifice itself. We have, then, competing traditions in a single letter of Paul about the dating of Jesus death relative to the Passover. At the same time, the Gospel of Peter and the one explicit baraita in the Talmud both support Johannine dating. John's dating is thus at least plausible, if not probable, based on multiple external sources.

5. Early church tradition paints at least a varied picture in its liturgical practice. At least some of these liturgies supports John's passion dating, perhaps more than is often imagined in Western Christianity. While the traditional Christian eucharist is linked to the last supper, there does appear to be an independent tradition, as found in the *Didache* at least, which constructs the eucharistic symbolism without the Passover in mind. While the *Didache's* underlying symbolism is not necessarily Johannine, it can be seen as harmonious with John's view. To put this more strongly, it is highly probable that the earliest eucharistic celebration finds its genesis not in a final Passover celebration of Jesus and his disciples, but rather it was formed around the common daily meal of bread and wine, offered perhaps many times, but with an increasing sense of finality toward the end of his ministry. Similarly, the strong tradition of the quartodecimans is almost certainly directly related to John's dating of the Passover. The extensive and firmly held quartodeciman liturgy in the Asian churches into the late second century speaks strongly to a tradition that is found in John. It is almost certain there were two separate traditions about the date of Jesus' death in the early church. And it is highly probable that both stem from early traditions that predate the gospels.

6. While John is often dismissed as theologically constructed, and thus unhistorical,

John's passion narrative is probably based on independent tradition rather than a theological design. Not only does the linkage of Jesus as a Passover sacrifice who "takes away the sin of the world" seem theologically strained, but the Fourth Evangelist makes no effort to underline the point. It is highly unlikely that John constructed his chronology to fit a theological perspective only to forget to mention it at the climax, the *telos*, of the story.

7. At the same time, the Synoptic chronology has significant internal difficulties that makes its internal consistency problematic. It is, then, moderately improbable that the Jewish leadership held a trial on the eve of Passover, improbable that they would request a public crucifixion on Passover, and improbable that Pilate would wait until the Passover feast was over to make a public and symbolic release of a prisoner (Barabbas). In other words, the Synoptic chronology itself has serious difficulties, and it is at least highly probable that its dating is theologically constructed around Jesus eating a final Passover meal with his disciples.

Seven signs, and seven conclusions-- a Johannine symbol to be sure. Is John accurate in his depiction of the last week of Jesus' life? That is difficult to say. Certainly his account is colored by his desire to bring readers to active belief and to instill an understanding of Jesus as the glory of God. So his account is, no doubt, constructed to achieve its end. But John's account has a unique chronology that differs from the Synoptics. It is my opinion that John's dating of the crucifixion on Nisan 14 is plausible and even probable. And it would appear that I am in good company:

Rudolf Schackenberg:

We may therefore conclude that there is no really convincing argument to support the contention that the evangelist had a Passover tradition in mind for the last

supper. It would also be wrong to assume that he deliberately changed the tradition to suit a theological intention. It is usually said that he wanted to present Jesus as the true Passover lamb who died on the cross at the same time the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the Temple. Even this idea, however, lacks a firm foundation in the gospel. The Evangelist does not in fact say this – it is simply a conclusion drawn from his chronology and his interest in the event of the Passover (see for example, 19:36).⁵⁶

Raymond Brown

We suggest then that, for unknown reasons, on Thursday evening the 14th of Nisan by the official calendar, the day before Passover, Jesus ate with his disciples a meal that had Passover characteristics. The Synoptists or their tradition, influenced by these Passover characteristics, too quickly made the assumption that the day was actually Passover; John, on the other hand, preserved the correct chronological information. Of course both the Synoptic and Johannine traditions were interested in the theological possibilities stemming from the Passover context in which Jesus died. If the fourth evangelist did not identify the day itself as Passover, he still had Jesus condemned to death at noon on Passover Eve (xix 14), the very hour at which the priests began to slaughter the paschal lambs in the temple area. The references to hyssop in xix 29 and to the unbroken bones in xix 36 may be other Passover allusions.⁵⁷

Josef Blinzler:

Although the synoptic dating still remains a problem, it would appear justifiable to give the preference to John's dating as being the more probable historically, and backed by non-Christian traditions, and to accept the fourteenth of Nisan as the day of Jesus' death.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Schnackenburg, Vol 3, 36

⁵⁷ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John xiii-xxi* (Doubleday, AB, 1970), 556

⁵⁸ Blinzler, 77.