

## THE DATE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LAST SUPPER

THERE is an apparent discrepancy between the Synoptic gospels and St. John's gospel in the relation of the Last Supper to the Passover; the Synoptists representing the Last Supper as the Passover meal, and St. John representing the Last Supper as taking place the night before the Passover. An increasing number of scholars has been inclining to accept John's chronology in this instance against the Synoptists. Professor Joachim Jeremias, however, in the *Journal of Theological Studies* for Jan.-April 1949, has presented a case for the identity of the Last Supper with the Passover, the cumulative effect of which seems to be conclusive. He accepts the Synoptic record at face value and he vindicates that record. On the other hand, he holds that the Johannine chronology is incorrect, and he supports the theory that it arose through the comparison of Jesus with the Paschal lamb (as in 1 Cor. v. 7) leading to the supposition that Jesus' death coincided with the slaying of the Passover lambs.

It is the purpose of this article to demonstrate, by an examination of the phraseology used, that there is no discrepancy between John and the Synoptists, and that John agrees with the Synoptists in representing the Last Supper as the Passover.

First, it must be borne in mind that there is a clear distinction in the Old Testament between the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, though the ceremonies are closely related. The Passover was held on the 14th day of the first month, the lamb being killed on the afternoon of that day and eaten the same night. The Feast began on the 15th day and continued to the 21st. The Passover was not a feast,<sup>1</sup> although it included a ritual meal, and was the necessary prelude to the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

In the New Testament the same two ceremonies are observed, but it is evident that by this time terminology is often

<sup>1</sup> Exodus xxxiv. 25 does indeed speak of "the sacrifice of the feast of the passover". But the phrase is unique in the Old Testament and probably means the meal eaten at the Passover, i.e. is probably not a technical designation.

employed more loosely. This is best illustrated by comparing Luke with Mark and Matthew.

Mark xiv. 1, ἦν δὲ τὸ πάσχα καὶ τὰ ἄζυμα μετὰ δύο ἡμέρας. There is some ambiguity in this title. It might designate the two sections of the whole period 14th–21st Nisan, in which τὸ πάσχα was followed by τὰ ἄζυμα, or more fully, ἡ ἑορτὴ τῶν ἀζύμων. On the other hand, τὰ ἄζυμα may be an abbreviation, not for ἡ ἑορτὴ τῶν ἀζύμων, but for αἱ ἡμέραι τῶν ἀζύμων, which included the Passover as well as the Feast (see verse 12). In this case Mark means that the days of unleavened bread, of which the Passover was the first, were to begin in two days.

Matthew xxvi. 2, οἴδατε ὅτι μετὰ δύο ἡμέρας τὸ πάσχα γίνεται, καὶ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου παραδίδοται εἰς τὸ σταυρωθῆναι. Matthew does not mention τὰ ἄζυμα. By τὸ πάσχα he probably means the Passover only, during the celebration of which the παράδοσις by Judas occurred (see verses 15, 16, 21, 23, etc.).

Luke xxii. 1, ἡγγιζεν δὲ ἡ ἑορτὴ τῶν ἀζύμων ἢ λεγομένη πάσχα. Luke has a much looser usage of πάσχα. It is not the strict Old Testament designation, but what Luke knew to be the popular use of the time. Plummer quotes Josephus (*Ant.* xiv. 2, 1), κατὰ τὸν καιρὸν τῆς τῶν ἀζύμων ἑορτῆς ἦν φάσκα λέγομεν. In the Old Testament the Feast of Unleavened Bread (LXX ἡ ἑορτὴ τῶν ἀζύμων) follows, and is distinct from the Passover, and if Luke is here following the Old Testament designation of ἡ ἑορτὴ τῶν ἀζύμων, then it is clear that "Passover" was used to describe the Feast as well as the introductory ceremony of 14th Nisan. It may be, however, that often no effort was made to distinguish between the two ceremonies, and that πάσχα loosely covered the whole period. Josephus even goes so far as to say that the eight-day period was all called ἡ ἑορτὴ τῶν ἀζύμων (*Ant.* ii, 15, 1, quoted by Plummer). This latter phrase only occurs in the New Testament in the reference in Luke which we are considering, and it seems likely that he, too, was taking it to cover the whole period. As Montefiore says: "Luke confuses together the opening 'Paschal' ceremony of the Lamb with the festival of Unleavened Bread, much as modern Jews to-day use the term 'Passover' to include the two" (*The Synoptic Gospels*, ad loc.).

Elsewhere Luke refers to the whole period 14th–21st Nisan as αἱ ἡμέραι τῶν ἀζύμων (Acts xii. 3; xx. 6) and, largely following Mark xiv. 12, he speaks of ἡ ἡμέρα τῶν ἀζύμων ἣ ᾄδει θύεσθαι

τὸ πάσχα (Luke xxii. 7). Of course both Passover and Feast were "days of unleavened bread" (see Deut. xvi. 3), though this is not an Old Testament designation.

As the last quotation from Luke shows, τὸ πάσχα could also be used in its more exact sense of Passover lamb or Passover meal: cf. φαγεῖν τὸ πάσχα, Mark xiv. 12 (=Matt. xxvi. 17, Luke xxii. 8); Mark xiv. 14 (=Luke xxii. 11); Luke xxii. 15; ἐτοιμαῖν τὸ πάσχα, Mark xiv. 12 (=Matt. xxvi. 19, Luke xxii. 13). But ποιεῖν τὸ πάσχα, Matt. xxvi. 18, is, according to the LXX, the more accurate expression.<sup>1</sup> Cf. Hebrews xi. 28, πεποήμεν τὸ πάσχα (Μωϋσῆς). This reflects Matthew's stricter Jewish sense, as does also his omission (from Mark xiv. 12) of ὅτε τὸ πάσχα ἔθουον, presumably as unnecessary for his readers.

In Luke ii. 41 occur the words ἐπορεύοντο . . . κατ' ἔτος . . . τῇ ἑορτῇ τοῦ πάσχα. The phrase is unique in the Synoptists, and in the Old Testament occurs only at Exodus xxxiv. 25 (*vid. supra*). There is no reason to suppose that the Passover proper was in Luke's mind. It was to the *Feast* that all males were bound to go, and the addition of τοῦ πάσχα is simply a loose designation of which Feast it was. But, as in the case of xxii. 1, the writer would probably have agreed, if pressed, that the expression included the Passover proper.

Before considering the terminology of John, the two uses of ἑορτή in Mark and Matthew are worthy of note: (1) κατὰ δὲ ἑορτήν, Mark xv. 6=Matthew xxvii. 15, probably does not refer to any particular feast, but simply means "at feast times", "as a festival custom". ἑορτή has a common, as well as a proper, use. (2) μὴ ἐν τῇ ἑορτῇ, μήποτε ἔσται θόρυβος τοῦ λαοῦ, Mark xiv. 2=Matthew xxvi. 5. ἐν τῇ ἑορτῇ carries with it the idea of publicity and celebration, and μὴ ἐν τῇ ἑορτῇ is probably parallel, as Jeremias points out, to Luke's ἀτερ ὄχλου (xxii. 6). Jeremias says that ἑορτή here, as in Plotinus, *Enn.*, 6, 6, 12, probably has the well-attested meaning "festal crowd". Be that as it may, one might almost translate ἐν τῇ ἑορτῇ as "amid the festal goings-on". In any case, the Feast, and not the Passover, is uppermost in the minds of the chief priests, and on this interpretation they carried out their intention, in arresting Jesus in the absence of crowd and publicity, and before the Feast began. Luke, however, who probably understood ἡ ἑορτὴ τοῦ πάσχα or ἡ ἑορτὴ τῶν ἀζύμων to include the Passover, omits μὴ

<sup>1</sup> I owe this point to Professor P. J. Heawood, of Durham.

ἐν τῇ ἑορτῇ κτλ, perhaps because, on his view, the words fell to the ground if Jesus was arrested on Passover night.

When we come to John's terminology, we notice that he uses both *πάσχα* and *ἑορτή* more frequently than any of the Synoptists, and that he does not use *τὰ ἄζυμα* at all. Thus it is not surprising that he employs *τὸ πάσχα* absolutely to mean the Feast of Unleavened Bread in a somewhat similar fashion to Luke and Josephus, although there is nothing to suggest that he had the Passover proper in mind as well when using the term.

In vi. 4 *τὸ πάσχα* is described as *ἡ ἑορτὴ τῶν Ἰουδαίων*, and twice we read simply *τὸ πάσχα τῶν Ἰουδαίων* (ii. 13; xi. 55), which is the same thing. The Feast primarily is meant. So also in xviii. 39, *ἕνα ἕνα ἀπολύσω ὑμῖν ἐν τῷ πάσχα*, with which we may compare *κατὰ ἑορτήν* and its festive aspect in the Synoptists.

Thus John uses *τὸ πάσχα* to mean the Feast of Unleavened Bread, without any special thought of the Passover proper. But the term is a definite, if popular, *title*. *ἑορτή*, on the other hand, is essentially neither a name nor a title, but a function, a social event almost. It is not synonymous with *τὸ πάσχα*, nor is it simply an abbreviation for Feast of Unleavened Bread or any other Feast. As the verbs used with it indicate, *ἑορτή* is something one "goes to", and when used on its own, especially in adverbial expressions, often contains a suggestion of the public, communal aspect of the ceremonies. We have already seen something of this in *κατὰ ἑορτήν* and *ἐν τῇ ἑορτῇ* in the Synoptists. It comes out in John in such verses as ii. 23: *ὡς δὲ ἦν ἐν τοῖς Ἱεροσολύμοις ἐν τῷ πάσχα, ἐν τῇ ἑορτῇ, πολλοὶ ἐπίστευσαν*. The distinction between the two phrases is completely obscured by the translation of the American R.S.V., "at the Passover feast". The English R.V. maintains a distinction with "at the passover, during the feast" (cf. A.V. and Douai). But the real force is that Jesus was not only in Jerusalem at the Paschal Feast (*ἐν τῷ πάσχα*), He was there *publicly* (*ἐν τῇ ἑορτῇ*), amid the festivities, or perhaps, amid the festal crowd, so that all could see the signs which He did.

Something of the same force seems to attach to the question of the Jews who speculated about Jesus' further manifestations of Himself, John xi. 54-7: *ὁ οὖν Ἰησοῦς οὐκέτι παροησιᾶ περιεπάτει ἐν τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις . . . ἦν δὲ ἐγγυὲς τὸ πάσχα τῶν Ἰουδαίων καὶ ἀνέβησαν πολλοὶ . . . πρὸ τοῦ πάσχα . . . καὶ ἔλεγον . . . τί δοκεῖ ὑμῖν; ὅτι οὐ μὴ*

ἔλθῃ εἰς τὴν ἑορτήν. The context gives the reason for their apprehensions, namely the order of the Pharisees and priests that Jesus' whereabouts should be disclosed if known. Thus the tone of the question, and the contrast with οὐδέτι παραρησία shows that εἰς τὴν ἑορτήν carries the suggestion "into the open"—"Will he show himself openly?"

ἑορτή is also used with the Feast proper in mind in xii. 20: ἦσαν δέ τινες Ἕλληνες ἐκ τῶν ἀναβαινόντων ἵνα προσκυνήσωσιν ἐν τῇ ἑορτῇ. As Gentiles they would not be permitted to be present at the Passover sacrifices anyhow (see Hoskyns and Davey, ad loc.), nor, presumably, to partake of the Passover meal. But they could worship at the Feast.

Again in xiii. 29: ἀγόρασον ὧν χρειαίαν ἔχομεν εἰς τὴν ἑορτήν, the *Feast* is meant, not the Passover. Never in the New Testament does ἑορτή refer to the Passover as distinct from the Feast, though occasionally, in very general expressions, it may include both. But if it refers to one or the other, as here, it must be to the Feast. The verse, then, is quite compatible with the Last Supper being the Passover.

Four verses mentioning τὸ πάσχα call for special attention, particularly as their interpretation is crucial for a correct understanding of John's chronology.

(1) John xii. 1, πρὸ ἑξ ἡμερῶν τοῦ πάσχα. If John elsewhere uses τὸ πάσχα to mean the Feast, without any special thought for the Passover proper, there is no reason why this note of time should not mean six days before 15th Nisan.

(2) John xviii. 28, ἵνα μὴ μιανθῶσιν, ἀλλὰ φάγωσι τὸ πάσχα. This phrase, φαγεῖν τὸ πάσχα, does not occur elsewhere in this gospel. If this statement were in the Synoptists, it would almost certainly apply to the *Passover* meal, as in Mark xiv. 12, etc., but in view of John's use of τὸ πάσχα, it may easily apply to the eating of the *Feast* on the evening of 15th Nisan. David Smith points out<sup>1</sup> that they would not necessarily have been prevented from eating the Passover even if they had entered the heathen Praetorium, for their defilement would only have lasted till evening, and they could then, after due ablution, have eaten the Passover. They would, however, have been debarred from the festivities of the first afternoon of the Feast. The Feast seems to have been regarded as commencing with the offering of the *Chagigah* or thank-offering in the Temple by each worshipper

<sup>1</sup> Hastings, *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, sub voc. *Preparation*.

in person on the afternoon of 15th Nisan. C. C. Torrey writes, "The great day of the feast, the holiday of rejoicing, was the 15th Nisan (Num. xxviii. 17f.). Since the Jewish householders, in that early morning, would have been debarred from joining in the festivity with their relatives and friends on that long-awaited day by the act of entering the Praetorium, it is no wonder that they remained outside the door!" Torrey adds that Strack-Billerbeck confirm this expressly in their *Kommentar*, II, 839 below.<sup>1</sup> In view of John's view of τὸ πάσχα elsewhere, the expression *ἵνα φάγωσι τὸ πάσχα* is natural enough. What else could John say meaning "to partake of the Feast"? His vocabulary is economical, and *ἐορτή* would not be appropriate; *ἐορτή* is something to "go to", not something to "eat".

(3) John xiii. 1, *πρὸ δὲ τῆς ἐορτῆς τοῦ πάσχα* . . . The precise significance of this verse is a matter of some difficulty, but it is usually taken as implying at least that the Last Supper took place *πρὸ τῆς ἐορτῆς τοῦ πάσχα*. In the light of John's use both of *ἐορτή* and *πάσχα*, it seems natural to take this as referring to the Feast proper and not to the Passover. But the compound phrase remains unique in John. Luke, as we have seen, uses it once (the only other occurrence in the New Testament) as a general description of the Feast to which pilgrims went each year. If John had said simply *πρὸ τοῦ πάσχα*, there might conceivably have been some ambiguity as to whether or not he was including the Passover thereby. But the fact that he adds *τῆς ἐορτῆς* makes the expression more exact—the supper spoken of took place before the *Festival* part of τὸ πάσχα—and practically implies that it was therefore the *Passover* supper which was being thus placed in relation to the imminent Feast.

(4) John xix. 14, *ἦν δὲ παρασκευὴ τοῦ πάσχα*, translated in R.V., "Now it was the preparation of the passover", and in A.R.S.V., "Now it was the day of preparation for the passover". The English revisers give a literal translation and leave the question of interpretation open. The American translators, with less caution, restrict the range of possibilities. Their version implies that *παρασκευὴ τοῦ πάσχα* was the day before the Passover. On the view that τὸ πάσχα in John is the Passover proper, this means that Jesus was crucified on 13th Nisan! Only on the view that τὸ πάσχα is the Feast would this mean that Jesus was crucified on 14th Nisan, or Passover day. But, in fact,

<sup>1</sup> *Our Translated Gospels*, pp. 47f.

it is more than doubtful whether "the day of preparation for the passover" is a correct translation. It should be noticed that in xix. 31 *παρασκευή* is clearly indicated as the day before the *sabbath*, which (since it fell within the Paschal period) was a "high day". In xix. 42 it is simply called *ἡ παρασκευὴ τῶν Ἰουδαίων* and this phrase, taken on its own, would certainly be considered as the equivalent of the expression *παρασκευή, ὅ ἐστιν προσάββατον*, which is the name Mark gives to the day of the crucifixion. On *παρασκευή* in Mark xv. 42 Rawlinson notes "i.e. Friday, *the day before the Sabbath*, still called 'Preparation' or *paraskeuē* in the Christian East". There is a good case, therefore, for translating *παρασκευὴ τοῦ πάσχα* as "Friday of Passover week". So, e.g., Torrey,<sup>1</sup> who argues (a) that the standing Aramaic term for the day of "preparation" for the sabbath, which originally meant "evening" or "*eve*", finally came to mean simply the sixth day of the week, and (b) that in Palestinian Aramaic usage of the first centuries of the Christian era no such phrase as "day of preparation for the passover" is known or to be expected.

The final question lies in the realm of general interpretation. If John knew that the Last Supper was the Passover, why, it may be urged, does he make little or nothing of the fact? The answer, if there is one, must be that John has other and stronger motifs in mind in relating this part of the gospel story. The view that the crucifixion coincided with the slaughter of the lambs is beset with no less difficulties, for the only indication that John may have had this in mind is his reference to the Old Testament, "A bone of him shall not be broken". There is, of course, no reason why John should not have regarded as appropriate a comparison of Jesus with the Passover lamb, on any view of the chronology, but in fact the verb *συντριβήσεται* weighs the balances in favour of the citation being, not from Exodus xii. 46, but from Psalm xxxiv. 20.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, that Jesus should have been crucified publicly on the great day of the Feast is well in accord with all that John has recorded of the relation of Jesus' ministry and manifestation to previous Feasts. Moreover, there is ample evidence that John

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., pp. 6, 24, 47.

<sup>2</sup> Professor C. H. Dodd, in his lectures on the Person of Christ in the N.T. at Cambridge in Easter Term, 1948, made the further point that a citation from Psalm xxxiv would be in line with the *testimonia* of other N.T. writers, who make considerable use of this Psalm. Professor Dodd apparently does not favour a Paschal identification either here or at i. 29.

is pointing to the coming Feast as the high point of Jesus' revelation of himself and his mission. The number of references that the Feast was nigh (xi. 55); the popular expectation that tension was rising and that the coming Feast might well bring a further manifestation of Jesus (xi. 56); the coming of the Greeks to worship at the Feast who "would see Jesus" (xii. 2off.); the belief of the disciples that Jesus would be celebrating the Feast with them (xiii. 29); the note that the Last Supper and the symbol of ministry in the feet-washing were in some relation to the imminent Feast (xiii. 1); all these are used by John to prepare the way. The "good day" of the Feast signified deliverance and salvation from Egypt, from the house of bondage. Further, if there is any "passover" element in John's motif, it perhaps resides in the fact that the sense of crisis and glory seems to reach a climax at the Last Supper. Even to the Greeks Jesus had said "Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out", corresponding perhaps to Jehovah's passover declaration "Against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments" (Exod. xii. 12); and with the departure of Judas, which must have also marked the conclusion of the Passover meal, Jesus announced: "*Now* is the Son of man glorified". The Lord passed over His own that night, and before they left the house Jesus could say "I have overcome the world".

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