

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php

THE ORIGIN OF THE DISCREPANCY BETWEEN THE SYNOPTISTS AND THE FOURTH GOSPEL AS TO THE DATE AND CHARACTER OF CHRIST'S LAST SUPPER WITH HIS DISCIPLES

GEORGE A. BARTON

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

ALL students of the New Testament are aware that the Synoptic Gospels explicitly state that the last supper of Jesus with his Disciples was the Jewish Passover, celebrated on the evening of Nisan 14, which, as the Jewish day began at sun-down, was counted as Nisan 15th (see Mark 14:12ff.; Luke 22:7 and 15; Mt. 26:17ff.), while the Fourth Gospel as explicitly implies that the last supper was not a Passover and that it was eaten on the previous evening (see John 13:29 and 18:28). Scholars are also well aware that this difference played an important part in a controversy at the end of the second century as to when and how Easter should be celebrated, known as the Quartodeciman controversy. It is not the purpose of the present paper to go into the nature of this controversy; that has been elaborately discussed by the late James Drummond in his article "The Paschal Controversy" in *The American Journal of Theology*, Vol. I, and by Professor Bacon in his *Fourth Gospel in Research and Debate*, ch. XVI. Bacon has clearly shown by quoting the letter of Irenaeus to Victor of Rome, preserved by Eusebius (EH, XXIV), that the discussion concerned not only the keeping of a festival which celebrated Christ's Resurrection, but also the keeping of a fast which preceded it. Bacon concluded, as several other scholars have also done, that the Fourth Gospel has here preserved

the older and more historical tradition. The reason for this conclusion is succinctly stated by F. R. Montgomery Hitchcock in *Hastings' Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, I, 415, as follows: "The cumulative evidence of St. John, St. Paul, and the early Fathers, joined with the incredibility of Jesus having been arrested, tried, and executed on the great Sabbath of the Jewish year, and the statement of the Synoptists that the day was *Paraskeue*, seem to turn the scale in favor of Nisan 14 as the day of the Crucifixion."

It has long seemed to the present writer that this view is, for the following reasons, untenable: 1. It plainly contradicts the text of the Synoptic Gospels, which state that the Supper was a Passover. If, as I believe, the Synoptic tradition goes back through Mark to Peter, it is hardly probable that he was mistaken as to the date and the character of the last Supper which he ate with his Master on the eve of the Crucifixion. 2. The use of *Paraskeue* by the Synoptists involves them in no inconsistency, since both Mark and Luke state that it was the "preparation" for the *Sabbath* that was referred to, and not the preparation for the Passover (Mark 15 42; Luke 23 54). It is an assumption based on later Jewish custom that *Paraskeue* was intended to refer to preparation for the Passover, and that we know more about it than St. Peter did. The assumption seems to the present writer gratuitous. 3. The inference that reverence for the Passover would prevent the Sanhedrin from arresting, trying, and crucifying Jesus on Passover-day is based entirely on later Jewish practice as reflected in the Talmud. Professor Margolis has warned some of us that it is not safe to reason from the Talmud to the time of Jesus, for the Judaism of the time of Jesus was by no means identical with that of the Talmud. It is probable that the New Testament is a better authority than the Talmud for those Jewish practices which it mentions. 4. When we recall that the High Priest at the time of Jesus' condemnation was a Sadducee, that he was one of a family that made large profits from the market for sacrificial animals carried on in the Temple-court, that Jesus had a few days before interrupted the business of that market at its most profitable

season, and that, as a Sadducee, the High Priest, who was also President of the Sanhedrin, would not have the scruples of a Pharisee in accomplishing the removal of an enemy on a holy day, there remains really no ground for denying that the last Supper was a Passover, except the statements of the Gospel of John, which was written sixty or seventy years later. It does not seem, therefore, a scientifically historical procedure to discard the authority of the Synoptists, especially as the statements of John with reference to the date, and the early practice to which Irenaeus testifies in his letter to Victor, can be naturally and satisfactorily accounted for in another way.

The Christian Church in Jerusalem was not separated from the Synagogue until the great war of 66-70. In the Acts of the Apostles we find the Christians of Jerusalem worshipping in the Temple as Jews with other Jews. Now we learn from Irenaeus that a part of the Quartodeciman controversy turned on the date of a fast which was observed in memory of Christ's suffering at his Crucifixion. In the time of Irenaeus in those places where Easter was always celebrated on a Sunday, the fast was observed on the preceding Friday, but in Asia there was another practice which Irenaeus declared went back to primitive times. Those who followed this fasted in memory of Christ's Crucifixion on the 14th of Nisan, and some, as the author of the Fourth Gospel, believed in consequence that the Crucifixion had actually occurred on the 14th.

It is the object of this paper to suggest a very simple explanation of the rise of the practice to which Irenaeus testifies, and of the consequent misunderstanding in the Fourth Gospel. The explanation is this: The primitive Church at Jerusalem consisted of orthodox Jews who were at the same time loyal Christians. As Christians they wished to fast in memory of the Master's sufferings; as Jews they wished to keep the Passover. It was, however, physically impossible to feast and fast at the same time. They accordingly anticipated the fast by a day, making it, perhaps, a part of the fast of Esther which other Jews were observing, so that as faithful Jews they could celebrate the Passover with others. The practice was followed by orthodox Jews in Ephesus and in the course of sixty or

seventy years gave rise to the supposition that the crucifixion had taken place on Nisan 14. This simple and natural supposition explains all the facts without calling in question the veracity of our oldest sources, and is, I believe, the true explanation. It seems impossible on the theory that the Fourth Gospel has here preserved the historical facts to account for the misunderstanding of those facts by the Synoptic writers.