The Last Supper

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TWO questions are discussed in this article. The first : Was the Last Supper the Passover ? The second : Are the Synoptists and the Johannine writer dealing with the same event ?

First it is necessary to be clear as to the meaning of the term " Johannine writer ". The view taken here is that of the late Dr. Temple in his *Readings in St. John* that the gospel is not that of the Apostle, but of " John the Elder ", an intimate disciple of St. John. This man, while he received the substance of his work from St. John, had associations and sympathies with Judea rather than with Galilee. He deals very little with Our Lord's ministry in Galilee, and by far the larger part of his narrative is concerned with the doings and sayings of Our Lord in and around Jerusalem. It is very important to have this in mind as we consider our subject. For the sake of convenience the Johannine writer will be called St. John in what follows.

It is obvious from any unbiased reading of the relevant passages that Our Lord fully intended to keep the Passover. It seems impossible to avoid this conclusion from St. Matthew xxvi. 18, " I will keep the Passover at thy house with My disciples ". Again St. Luke xxii. 8, " He sent Peter and John saying, Go and prepare us the Passover ". Reverent minds will feel convinced that such a purpose of Our Lord could not be frustrated ; but leaving this aside, there is no doubt from the synoptic story that this intention was fulfilled. In St. Matthew we read (xxvi. 19, 20), " and they made ready the Passover. Now when even was come, He sat down with the twelve ". So also St. Mark xiv. 12*ff.*, " And the first day of unleavened bread, when they killed the Passover . . . and they made ready the Passover. And in the evening He cometh with the twelve. And as they sat and did eat. . . ." And St. Luke (xxii. 13, 14), " they made ready the Passover. And when the hour was come, He sat down and the twelve apostles with Him."

There follow in St. Luke some words of Our Lord which, in view of what has preceded, are extremely significant, " With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you " (xxii. 15). It is a strange perversion of this utterance which sees in it a sob of regret that His purpose would not be fulfilled. Taken in conjunction with what has just gone before, it cannot mean anything else than an expression of relief and satisfaction that His plans have not been frustrated and that He has succeeded in His purpose to share this last Passover before His death with His beloved disciples. There is every indication in the narrative that He feared His enemies might arrest Him before He could keep the Passover and that He took precautions that the place of meeting might be concealed even from Judas. Two of His most

intimate disciples were sent and given what was evidently a pre-arranged sign to enable them to discover the house in which a room had been set apart for their Master's use.

Emphasis is frequently laid, by those who deny that the Last Supper was the Passover, on Our Lord's words (St. Luke xxii. 18), " I will not drink of the fruit of the vine " as indicating that He did not then drink of the wine, and that so it could not have been the Passover in view of His previously expressed desire to share the Passover with His disciples. But this is the A.V. reading and does not give the full force of the Greek " οὐ μὴ πίω ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν ". The R.V. renders it, " I will not drink from henceforth ". This is also the A.V. version of Matthew xxvi. 29, " I will not drink henceforth ". St. Mark xiv. 25, A.V., gives, " I will drink no more ". Moffatt's translation is stronger still, " I will never drink of the produce of the vine again till. . . ." All of which appear to mean that He is drinking it now for the last time before His death.

Another incident used to suggest that the Last Supper was not the Passover is that in St. John xiii. 27*ff.*, and the disciples' conjecture that Our Lord's words to Judas were a direction to buy something for the feast, so suggesting that what they were then partaking was not the Passover. But it should be remembered that the festival lasted a whole week, during which other gifts and offerings were made. It was presumably these the disciples had in mind as an explanation of Our Lord's words, and not something for the one night's solemn celebration of Passover. The identity of this Last Supper with the Passover is clearly revealed by the resemblance of the words and actions of Our Lord to the ritual of this feast.

Four cups of wine are drunk, each member of the company having his own cup. This is filled from the larger cup over which the celebrant gives thanks. The first cup is known as the Kiddush cup, proclaiming the holiness of God ; the second is called the cup of the Haggadah, or narration of the story of the first Passover and the deliverance from the bondage of Egypt ; the third cup is called the cup of Blessing ; the last is the cup of the Hallel, when the Great Hallel (Psalm cxxxvi) is recited or sung. This was probably the hymn referred to (Matt. xxvi. 30) before the departure to the Mount of Olives. Traditionally these four cups are a reminder of the promises (Exodus vi. 6, 7), " I will bring you out," " I will rid you," " I will redeem you," " I will take you unto Myself ".

The third of these cups—that after Supper, the " cup of blessing ", over which grace after the meal is said, was that by which Our Lord instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion as St. Paul tells us (1 Cor. x. 16). See also St. Luke xxii. 20, " Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in My blood ".

Another feature of the Passover in the time of Our Lord was " The sop ". Dr. Alfred Edersheim draws attention to the use of the definite article " the ", not " a " sop as indicating its importance as a feature of the feast. It consisted of pieces of unleavened bread, the flesh of the Passover Lamb, and bitter herbs wrapped together. These were passed round by the celebrant to the rest of the company. John we know occupied the seat of honour, reclining on the right of Our

Lord. It is assumed from both the narrative and the character of Judas that he had seized the next in importance and reclined on the left of Our Lord. It was therefore easy for Our Lord to pass the sop first to Judas. This was not only a sign in response to St. John's query. It was a last appeal to Judas to bring home to him the enormity of the deed he was about to commit, as the passing of the first " sop " to a guest was a special mark of honour. To betray a man whose bread you have eaten is, to an oriental, a crime of the blackest treachery.

To-day there is no Paschal lamb. The Temple, where alone it could be offered, is no more. The very spot on which it stood was ploughed, so that literally there was not left one stone upon another (Matt. xxiii. 2). The place of the lamb in the Passover service of to-day is taken by a mixture called Harosheth. This is a kind of paste compounded of various fruits—figs, nuts, almonds, dates, pomegranates, apples, ginger, with sticks of cinnamon. This sweetmeat is said to represent the clay of which the bricks were made in Egypt, the sticks of cinnamon taking the place of the straw or stubble.

Still another feature of the Passover service is the breaking of the bread before the Haggadah, when the celebrant, after washing his hands, says, " This is the bread of affliction which your fathers ate in the land of Egypt ". Here presumably it was that Our Lord said, " This is my body " (Mark xiv. 22) as He broke the bread. Two points should be noticed here. Firstly, there is no Hebrew equivalent for the English " typifies " or " represents ". The speaker is obliged to say words expressing identity. (See B. L. Kennett, *Teaching of Scripture*, p. 27.) Compare St. Paul, Gal. iv. 25. " For this Agar is mount Sinai." Just as the Irishman, the Scot and the Welshman, speaking English, will frequently use the idiom of his own language, so St. Paul, writing in Greek, uses the Hebrew idiom. Secondly, Dr. Edersheim says (*Life and Times of the Messiah*, Third Edition, page 510), " The copula *is* [' This is my body ', ' This is my blood '] was certainly not spoken by the Lord in Aramaic, just as it does not occur in the Jewish formula in the breaking of the bread at the beginning of the Paschal Supper ".

The reader of the Old Testament Scriptures in the A.V. will notice that the word " is " always appears in italics except where it occurs as part of an inflected verb, showing that it is not expressed in Hebrew. As the Hebrew or Aramaic speaker is obliged to say, " This the bread of affliction," meaning " This typifies the bread of affliction ", so Our Lord said, " This My Body," " This My Blood," at the same point in the service. So we have these striking features of the Passover service in the Last Supper—the name of the cup after supper, " The cup of Blessing," " The Sop," and the " Breaking of Bread ", serving to identify them.

There remains to be explained the fact that St. John clearly indicates in several places that this Supper took place " before the feast of the Passover ", as he says (xiii. 1), and again there is his statement that Our Lord's accusers would not enter Pilate's judgment hall lest they might be defiled; but that they might keep the Passover; apparently indicating that the feast had not begun. There is also his reference to the early part of Friday as " the preparation " for the Passover. It

is then clear that the religious authorities of Jerusalem regarded Friday as the day of the Passover. That is to say the Passover supper for them began at 6 p.m. on Friday evening, even though Our Lord and His disciples had kept it the preceding evening.

Critics will say, " It would have been impossible for Our Lord and His disciples to have kept a true Passover, for the Temple authorities would not have accepted the lamb for offering on the previous day ". This objection arises either from ignorance of the ritual of the sacrifice or from failure to examine it closely. If it be further said that it could not be a true Passover because it was held on the wrong date, this also arises from lack of knowledge of the Jewish method of calculating the date.

The Jewish month is lunar, and up to the middle of the fourth century the determination of the first of the month was very uncertain. The Reverend Khodadad E. Keith, a Persian Christian Jew, to whose brochure " The Passover in the Time of Christ " I am greatly indebted for information on this subject, quotes Doctor M. Friedlander (*The Jewish Religion*) as saying, " The beginning of the astronomical month is the moment of the conjunction of the sun and moon (called in Hebrew ' Molad '—birth), when the moon is exactly between the earth and the sun. Nothing is then visible of the moon. At least six hours later a very small portion of the moon can, under favourable circumstances, be seen, and the day on which this takes place is the first of the month." Such a method of calculation is obviously very liable to error. This was fully realized by the Jewish authorities, and the President of the Sanhedrin sat with two other members to hear the evidence of witnesses as to the exact time when the first tiny crescent of the moon made its appearance. There was sometimes conflict in the evidence itself and the court might even differ as to the value of the evidence. Many factors such as weather conditions, locality, individual eyesight and even temperament had to be taken into account. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the Samaritans, the traditional enemies of the Jews, frequently confused matters by lighting beacon fires on the hills, as this was the method adopted to publish the accepted day of the first of the month. So it would occasionally happen that in different parts of the country differences occurred in the calendar. There was at least one occasion indeed, when, even in the Holy City itself, the Day of Atonement, the most solemn fast in the Jewish year, was differently accepted. Rabban Gamaliel II and Rabban Joshua fixed the date differently in the first century. There are on record many instances of disputes and uncertainties as to the exact date. Many Jewish communities in Africa, Asia Minor and Europe were naturally out of range of the signal fires and could only learn of the decision of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin by messenger or letter.

There would therefore appear to be no improbability that Our Lord regarded Thursday as the fourteenth Nisan, while the Sanhedrin fixed it on Friday. So Our Lord celebrated the Passover at supper after 6 p.m. on Thursday, Gentile reckoning or the beginning of Friday, Jewish. This being also the Jewish Sabbath, " that Sabbath was an high day " (St. John xix. 31). As to the argument that the Temple

authorities would not have accepted the lamb for sacrifice except on the proper day, in the circumstances it would seem to have been inevitable. It would have been impossible to slay the vast number of lambs required and to carry out the prescribed ritual on one afternoon. According to law the lambs were to be sacrificed " between the two evenings " (Exod. xii, 6, marginal reading). This is generally taken to mean in the afternoon between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m.

Normally the population of Jerusalem was about 600,000, but Josephus tells us that at Passover time it rose to about 2,500,000, for it was one of the feasts at which all the males eligible to form the Minyan, that is the necessary 10 to constitute a congregation for the purpose of worship, were ordered to present themselves. Many would come with their families and swell the multitude. As the number of the company to eat the Passover lamb must be at least 10 and not exceed 20, the number of lambs to be sacrificed would be very great. Let us suppose the average company to be 15, this would call for nearly 170,000 lambs.

Dr. Edersheim gives a full account of the ritual of the Passover sacrifice in his book, *The Temple and its Services*. If we take the account given on page 191 to be accurate it will be at once evident how impossible it would be to deal with this vast number of lambs " in the evening " or " between the evenings ", however you render the Hebrew expression. " All along the court," he says, " and up to the altar of burnt offering priests stood in two rows, the one holding golden, the other silver bowls. In these the blood of the Paschal lamb, which each Israelite slew for himself and his company at the Paschal supper, was caught up by a priest who handed it to his colleague, receiving back an empty bowl, and so the bowls with the blood were passed up to the priest at the altar, who jerked it in one jet at the base of the altar."

Assuming that by the word " priest " he means the priest at the head of each of the two rows he has mentioned, this would mean that there were two priests engaged in throwing the blood at the base of the altar. Let us think what this means in terms of time occupied. Could the act of cutting the throat and catching the blood in the bowl be performed in less than four seconds inclusive of the passing on of the bowl and receiving the empty one back? With 170,000 lambs and two priests operating this would take half of $4 \times 170{,}000$ seconds or over 94 hours, supposing all the priests and slaughterers to be drilled to the speed and precision of guardsmen, and to be capable of carrying on this action uninterruptedly for this extended period; an incredible feat. But can we reduce this time in any way? It can be done either by assuming that the number of rows of priests can be increased, or by a drastic reduction of the numbers given by Josephus.

The first of these is limited by the space available, owing to the construction of the altar and its approaches. Edersheim tells us that the altar was about 13 feet high; it was approached by a ramp 24 feet wide, mounting up to a kind of terrace, the top of which was about 10 feet above the ground. This ramp was 48 feet long. How many lines of priests could operate on this ramp 24 feet wide with due consideration for the safety of the outside row standing on the edge of the slope varying in height from the ground up to ten feet? At the same time

space would have to be left for the passing of the bowls and the casting of the blood at the base of the altar. The utmost number could not have been greater than eight. All of these working without intermission at top speed could deal with 170,000 lambs in a little over 26 hours, but this is clearly making a demand that human flesh and blood could not meet. The number of lambs must be drastically reduced and the period of sacrifice considerably extended. If we reject the commonly accepted interpretation of the Hebrew phrase " between the evenings " as being between the hours of 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. on the same day, and regard it as meaning between the afternoon of Thursday and the late afternoon of Friday we may bring the task within the bounds of possibility.

This would permit of Our Lord's Passover lamb's being slain and the full ritual with the burning of the fat and the entrails completed in time for the celebration of a Passover meal beginning, according to Gentile reckoning, at 6 p.m. on Thursday evening, or according to Jewish reckoning, the beginning of Friday.

So Our Lord and His disciples kept the Passover according to Our Lord's reckoning on the 15th Nisan, with a lamb duly sacrificed on the 14th Nisan on Thursday ; the Judean authorities kept the Passover with lambs slain, some on 13th Nisan, according to their reckoning, and some on Friday 14th Nisan. Thus Christ our Passover lamb was being offered on Calvary while the blood of Passover lambs was still being poured out at the great altar in the Temple.

The Gospel of John is dominated in its chronology of the Passover festival by the local associations of the writer with Jerusalem, as it is in its absorption in the Judean ministry of Our Lord, and so he disregards the Last Supper as the Galilean equivalent of the Judean festival. There were, in fact, two Passovers held that year in Jerusalem, if not in other places, and each was, according to different methods of calculation, celebrated on the night of the 15th Nisan with lambs sacrificed, according to the Mosaic law, on 14th Nisan.