



Ratzinger and Aquinas on the Dating of the Last Supper: In Defense of the Synoptic Chronology

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Abstract

This essay takes up the question of the dating of the Last Supper and the apparent contradiction between the Gospel of John and the Synoptic Gospels with regard to the date of the Passover Feast in the year that Jesus died. Our point of departure is Joseph Ratzinger's consideration of the same problem in the second volume of his recent book *Jesus of Nazareth*, wherein he ultimately concedes the irreconcilability of the two accounts and concludes in favor of the historical accuracy of the Johannine rather than the Synoptic chronology. The second part of this essay then takes up and re-proposes the solution to this apparent contradiction given by St Thomas Aquinas. The intervening centuries of 'higher criticism' notwithstanding, Aquinas's solution remains satisfactory inasmuch as it preserves the historical truth of all four Gospel accounts whole and entire, and does so with an historical plausibility and an elegant simplicity that is not forced to rely upon tenuous historical reconstructions. Moreover, there are strong arguments that can be drawn from the Gospel itself and from Jewish laws and customs pertaining to Passover which can be marshaled in favor of Aquinas's interpretation.

Keywords

Ratzinger, Aquinas, Passover, Last Supper, Biblical Chronology

In the second volume of Joseph Ratzinger's *Jesus of Nazareth*, which treats of the life of Christ from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem to his glorious Resurrection, the author takes up the difficult question of the dating of the Last Supper, which is essentially the question as to whether the Last Supper was or was not a Passover meal according to the Mosaic prescriptions. Ratzinger is concerned here not so much to settle every detail of historical chronology, but simply to show the "actual historicity" of the event, a question, he says,

from which “we cannot prescind.”¹ “Many details may remain open. Yet the *‘factum est’* of John’s Prologue (1:14) is a basic Christian category, and it applies not only to the Incarnation: it must also be invoked for the Last Supper, the Cross, and the Resurrection.”² It happened (*factum est*); this is in fact the central presupposition and principal contribution of Ratzinger’s entire portrait of Jesus. The actual historicity of the Gospels is crucial for faith. Ratzinger explains:

The New Testament message is not simply an idea; essential to it is the fact that these events actually occurred in the history of this world: biblical faith does not recount stories as symbols of meta-historical truths; rather, it bases itself upon history that unfolded upon this earth (cf. Part One, p. xv). If Jesus did *not* give his disciples bread and wine as his body and blood, then the Church’s eucharistic celebration is empty – a pious fiction and not a reality at the foundation of communion with God and among men.³

Ratzinger refers us here as well to his methodological outline as it appears in the foreword to the first volume, wherein he grounds the necessity of the historical-critical method of exegesis in the essentially historical nature of Christianity:

The first point is that the historical-critical method – specifically because of the intrinsic nature of theology and faith – is and remains an indispensable dimension of exegetical work. For it is of the essence of biblical faith to be about real historical events. It does not tell stories symbolizing suprahistorical truths, but is based on history, history that took place here on this earth. The *factum historicum* (historical fact) is not an interchangeable symbolic cipher for biblical faith, but the foundation on which it stands: *Et incarnatus est* – when we say these words, we acknowledge God’s actual entry into real history.

If we push this history aside, Christian faith as such disappears and is recast as some other religion. So if history, if facticity in this sense, is an essential dimension of Christian faith, then faith must expose itself to the historical method – indeed, faith itself demands this.⁴

When it comes to the point of the historical dating of the Last Supper, however, while Ratzinger’s account surely succeeds in showing the ‘actual historicity’ of the Last Supper, nevertheless, in the end,

¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth, Volume 2: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, trans. Philip J. Whitmore (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), p. 103.

² *Ibid.*, p. 105.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 103–104.

⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth, Volume 1: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), p. xv.

the chronology which he accepts still leaves something to be desired from the point of view of ‘historical inerrancy’ – a more exacting category than ‘actual historicity’. By accepting the apparent chronology of St John’s Gospel, which cannot be made to agree with the Synoptic Gospels, Ratzinger inevitably leaves the impression, much as he strives against it, that the Synoptic accounts, no matter how ‘true’ they may be theologically, are nevertheless, in the final analysis, historically erroneous. In contrast to this, and notwithstanding the intervening centuries of ‘higher criticism’, the perennial solution as given by St Thomas Aquinas (which he receives from the fathers) remains sufficient and satisfactory inasmuch as it preserves the historical truth of all four Gospel accounts whole and entire, and does so with an historical plausibility and an elegant simplicity that is not forced to rely upon tenuous historical reconstructions.

Let us look first therefore at the apparent discrepancy between the Gospel of St John and the Synoptic Gospels on this point, and at Ratzinger’s discussion of the difficulty, before taking up and re-proposing the alternative solution given by St Thomas. If by doing so I am availing myself of Ratzinger’s humble invitation to contradiction – “Everyone is free, then, to contradict me”⁵ – I hope that the goodwill which he asks of his readers in return is evident throughout.

PART I. RATZINGER ON THE DATING OF THE LAST SUPPER

All three of the Synoptic Gospels clearly place the Last Supper on the first day of unleavened bread, on the day on which the Passover lambs were sacrificed, and thus on the fourteenth day of the first month of the Jewish year (the month of Nisan):

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the passover?’ . . . When it was evening, he sat at table with the twelve disciples . . . (Mt 26:17, 20).

And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the passover lamb, his disciples said to him, ‘Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the passover?’ . . . And when it was evening he came with the twelve (Mk 14:12, 17).

Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the passover lamb had to be sacrificed . . . And when the hour came, he sat at table, and the apostles with him (Lk 22:7, 14).

The Synoptic Gospels are equally clear that the crucifixion took place on a Friday, “the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the

⁵ Ibid., p. xxiv.

sabbath” (Mk 15:42; cf. Mt 27:62; Lk 23:54), and that the Resurrection occurred on Sunday, the “first day of the week” (Mt 28:1; Mk 16:1–2; Lk 24:1). The Synoptic chronology can thus be summarized as follows. Thursday, the fourteenth of Nisan, was the vigil of the Passover festival. After sunset the Passover began, and Jesus ate the Passover meal with his disciples, and then went out into the Garden of Gethsemane. There he was arrested and taken to the court of the Jews. Early in the morning on Friday, the fifteenth of Nisan and the day of the Passover feast itself, he was taken before Pontius Pilate. He was crucified at the “third hour” (Mk 15:25), darkness came over the land from the “sixth hour” (Mk 15:33; Mt 27:45; Lk 23:44), and around the “ninth hour” Christ cried out and expired (Mk 15:34–37; Mt 27:46–50). Saturday, the sixteenth day of Nisan, was the sabbath, and Christ’s body rested in the tomb. He then rose from the dead on Sunday, the seventeenth of Nisan.

St John’s presentation of the events agrees with the Synoptics regarding the days of the week: the crucifixion took place on a Friday (Jn 19:31); this was the day after the Last Supper, which therefore took place on Thursday; and the Resurrection occurred on Sunday (Jn 20:1). But at three points, St John seems to indicate that the feast of Passover fell that year on Saturday rather than on Friday. In other words, whereas the Synoptics clearly present Thursday as the fourteenth of Nisan and Friday as the fifteenth, St John seems to make Friday the fourteenth and Saturday the fifteenth. The Last Supper would then have occurred on the thirteenth, and thus would not have been a Passover meal at all according to the Mosaic law. While this connection is lost for theology, another is gained. For Jesus would then die upon the Cross at the very hour when the paschal lambs were being sacrificed in the Temple, thus dying as the true lamb of God: “Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor 5:7).

What are these three points which separate St John from the Synoptics? First of all, whereas the Synoptics place the Last Supper on the first day of unleavened bread, St John introduces the meal by saying: “before the feast of the Passover...” (Jn 13:1), thus indicating that, although “the Passover of the Jews was at hand” (Jn 11:55), this meal still occurred before it began. Secondly, he includes a remark about the trial before Pontius Pilate which the Synoptics do not mention. The Jewish leaders would not enter the praetorium, and St John gives the reason: “so that they might not be defiled, but might eat the passover” (Jn 18:28). From this it can easily be inferred that they had not yet eaten the Passover, whereas according to the Synoptics it should have been eaten the night before. Finally, when St John notes the day and the hour of Pilate’s judgment, he writes: “Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about the

sixth hour” (Jn 19:14).⁶ Here is how Ratzinger summarizes the Johannine chronology:

John goes to great lengths to indicate that the Last Supper was not a Passover meal. On the contrary: the Jewish authorities who led Jesus before Pilate’s court avoided entering the praetorium, “so that they might not be defiled, but might eat the Passover” (18:28). The Passover, therefore, began only in the evening, and at the time of the trial the Passover meal had not yet taken place; the trial and crucifixion took place on the day before the Passover, on the “day of preparation”, not on the feast day itself. The Passover feast in the year in question accordingly ran from Friday evening until Saturday evening, not from Thursday evening until Friday evening . . . According to this chronology, Jesus dies at the moment when the Passover lambs are being slaughtered in the Temple. Jesus dies as the real lamb, merely prefigured by those slain in the Temple.⁷

Ratzinger remarks that many attempts have been made to reconcile the apparent contradiction between John and the Synoptics on this point, but he discusses only one, that of the French scholar Annie Jaubert, who developed a well known two-calendar hypothesis in the middle of the twentieth century.⁸ According to this hypothesis, Jesus may have been using an ancient priestly calendar associated with the Essenes at Qumran. If so, he would have celebrated the Passover meal at least a day or two earlier, probably on Tuesday evening, whereas the Jewish authorities would have done so only on Friday evening. “Both the Synoptic and the Johannine traditions thus appear to be correct on the basis of the discrepancy between two different calendars.”⁹

Interestingly enough, Pope Benedict XVI discussed this same hypothesis approvingly only four years earlier, in a homily given in the Lateran Basilica for the Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday. Speaking of this apparent contradiction between the Gospels, the Holy Father remarked that, although this contradiction had previously seemed insoluble, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran had led to a new and very probable solution.¹⁰ Says the pope: “He probably celebrated the Passover with his disciples according to the

⁶ The timing of events within the day of Christ’s crucifixion thus presents yet another point of apparent discrepancy between St John and the Synoptic Gospels.

⁷ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 2, p. 108.

⁸ Annie Jaubert, *The Date of the Last Supper: The Biblical Calendar and Christian Liturgy* (New York: Alba House, 1965).

⁹ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 2, p. 110.

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, “Homily in Cena Domini,” AAS 97 (2007), pp. 233–34: “*Nei racconti degli evangelisti esiste un’apparente contraddizione tra il Vangelo di Giovanni, da una parte, e ciò che, dall’altra, ci comunicano Matteo, Marco e Luca . . . Questa contraddizione fino a qualche anno fa sembrava insolubile . . . La scoperta degli scritti di Qumran*

calendar of Qumran, and thus at least one day earlier.”¹¹ In the present volume, however, Ratzinger finds this hypothesis – “so fascinating on first sight”¹² – to be finally unsatisfying. It would seem too much out of character if Jesus, who went so frequently to the Temple for the great feasts, used the liturgical calendar of a minority sect in opposition to the Temple. “So while I would not reject this theory outright,” he concludes, “it cannot simply be accepted at face value, in view of the various problems that remain unresolved.”¹³

At this point, then, Ratzinger accepts the judgment of John Meier, a Catholic priest and professor of New Testament at the University of Notre Dame, who “concludes that one has to choose between the Synoptic and Johannine chronologies, and he argues, on the basis of the whole range of source material, that the weight of the evidence favors John.”¹⁴ Although Ratzinger places the judgment which says that the chronologies simply cannot be reconciled in the mouth of another scholar – perhaps still hoping that the discrepancy really is only apparent and that the contradiction might still be resolved, as he at one time thought it could be by the two-calendar hypothesis – he clearly endorses Meier’s position in favor of the Johannine chronology as the historically accurate one. Why so? Ratzinger offers two considerations. Speaking of the Synoptic account, he writes that:

This chronology suffers from the problem that Jesus’ trial and crucifixion would have taken place on the day of the Passover feast, which that year fell on a Friday. True, many scholars have tried to show that the trial and crucifixion were compatible with the prescriptions of the Passover. But despite all academic arguments, it seems questionable whether the trial before Pilate and the crucifixion would have been permissible and possible on such an important Jewish feast day. Moreover, there is a comment reported by Mark that militates against this hypothesis. He tells us that two days before the feast of Unleavened Bread, the chief priests and scribes were looking for an opportunity to bring Jesus under their control by stealth and kill him, but in this regard, they declared: “not during the feast, lest there be a tumult of the people” (14:1–2).¹⁵

A few pages later he returns to the first point, which argues that the Synoptic account is historically problematic inasmuch as it presents Christ’s trial and crucifixion on the great feast day itself. At the same

ci ha nel frattempo condotto ad una possibile soluzione convincente che, pur non essendo ancora accettata da tutti, possiede tuttavia un alto grado di probabilità.”

¹¹ Ibid., p. 234: “Egli però ha celebrato la Pasqua con i suoi discepoli probabilmente secondo il calendario di Qumran, quindi almeno un giorno prima.”

¹² Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 2, p. 111.

¹³ Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁴ Ibid. The work to which Ratzinger refers is: John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).

¹⁵ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 2, p. 107.

time, however, he admits that it is also problematic theologically to abandon the paschal character of the Last Supper:

Today, though, it is becoming increasingly clear that John's chronology is more probable historically than the Synoptic chronology. For as mentioned earlier: trial and execution on the feast seem scarcely conceivable. On the other hand, Jesus' Last Supper seems so closely tied to the Passover tradition that to deny its Passover character is problematic.¹⁶

Two comments are in order here. Firstly, any considerations which incline toward the Johannine chronology only become decisive if it really is impossible to reconcile it with the Synoptics. If they can be reconciled, they must be, whether this means adapting the *prima facie* reading of the Synoptic account to the Johannine or vice versa. Secondly, regarding the *a priori* implausibility of a public trial and crucifixion on the very day of the Passover feast, it would be well to recall the story which Ratzinger himself relates in an earlier chapter in connection with the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70:

According to Flavius Josephus, Titus must have arrived at the gates of the Holy City just at the time of the Passover feast, on the fourteenth day of the month Nisan, and therefore on the fortieth anniversary of Jesus' crucifixion. Thousands of pilgrims were pouring into Jerusalem. John of Gischala, one of the rival leaders of the rebellion, smuggled armed fighters, disguised as pilgrims, into the Temple, where they began to massacre the followers of his opponent, Eleazar ben Simon, and so once again the sanctuary was defiled with innocent blood...¹⁷

The only point which I would like to draw from this account here is this: that one must be careful of making too much of *a priori* reasoning in the study of history. If it "seems questionable whether the trial before Pilate and the crucifixion would have been permissible and possible on such an important Jewish feast day,"¹⁸ then surely it would scarcely be conceivable that Jewish zealots would disguise themselves as pilgrims coming to celebrate Passover in order to massacre their fellow Jews within the Temple itself. History is full of the implausible. If these Jews forty years later were willing to defile even the Temple with innocent blood for political considerations, it cannot be overly surprising that some of the Jewish leaders of Christ's time were willing similarly to defile the feast of the Passover. In any case, whether on the Passover festival itself or on its great vigil, it is quite clear that those who conspired against Christ simply failed in their stated intention to avoid a tumultuous trial and execution. There is no reason to doubt the historical truth of the Synoptic chronology as

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

such; only if the Gospel accounts are really irreconcilable does it become necessary to speculate as to which is the more likely historical scenario.

PART II. AQUINAS ON THE DATING OF THE LAST SUPPER

The apparent discrepancy between St John and the Synoptics with regard to the paschal character of the Last Supper is a question which St Thomas addresses frequently, usually in the context of defending the Latin practice of using unleavened bread to confect the Eucharist against Greek criticism.¹⁹ The question arises because the Latin tradition is based upon the conviction that the Last Supper was a Passover meal, and therefore that Christ himself used unleavened bread in the institution of the Eucharist. The Greeks, however, were arguing, on the basis of the apparent chronology of St John's Gospel, that the Last Supper was not a Passover meal; they concluded from this that Christ would have used leavened bread for instituting the Eucharist rather than unleavened.

Now with regard to the particular question of using leavened or unleavened bread in the celebration of the sacrament, St Thomas affirms the legitimacy of both practices, and encourages each priest to follow the custom of his own Church.²⁰ The Greeks, however, were denying not only the legitimacy but even the validity of the Eucharist confected with unleavened bread. Against this, St Thomas appeals to the authority of the Synoptic Gospels, which clearly place the Last Supper on the first day of the feast of Unleavened Bread. He continues:

Now, since it was not permitted by the Law that from the first day of the unleavened bread anything leavened be found in the homes of the Jews (which is clear from Exodus 12:15), and since our Lord as long as He was in the world kept the Law, clearly He converted unleavened bread into His body and gave it to His disciples to receive.²¹

In rare strong language, St Thomas then concludes: "It is stupid, then, to attack in the use of the Latin Churches what our Lord observed in the very institution of this sacrament."²² The Greeks, on the other hand, appealed to St John's Gospel against the verdict of the Synoptics, relying for support on two of the three verses

¹⁹ St Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super Sententiis* IV, d. 11, q. 2, a. 2, qc. 3; *Summa contra Gentiles* IV, cap. 69; *Summa theologiae* III, q. 46, a. 9, ad 1; q. 74, a. 4; *Contra errores Graecorum* II, cap. 39; *Super Matthaeum*, cap. 26, lec. 2; *Super Ioannem*, cap. 13, lec. 1; cap. 18, lec. 5.

²⁰ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, q. 74, a. 4.

²¹ Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* IV, cap. 69, n. 4.

²² *Ibid.*

already reviewed above (Jn 13:1; 18:28). St Thomas addresses the matter briefly here, but his fullest exposition is to be found in his commentary on the Gospel of St John.

When St Thomas arrives at chapter 13 in his commentary on St John's Gospel, he remarks:

A problem arises as to why he says here, **before the feast of the Passover**, for the feast of the Passover is when the lamb was sacrificed, that is, on the 14th day of the month. So since he says, **before the feast of the Passover**, it seems that this was taking place on the 13th day, the day before the 14th.²³

Still in conversation with the Greeks, St Thomas refers again to the Synoptic accounts, which clearly place the Last Supper on the day when the paschal lambs were sacrificed, that is, on the fourteenth of the month. To the Greeks who reply that the other Evangelists were mistaken on this point, St Thomas responds with a strong statement of principle: "But it is heresy to say that there is anything false not only in the Gospels but anywhere in the canonical scriptures. Consequently, we have to say that all the Evangelists state the same thing and do not disagree."²⁴

In order to reconcile the apparently divergent chronologies on this point, then, St Thomas recalls the simple and well known fact that the Jews followed a lunar calendar, reckoning their days from moonrise to moonrise, or sunset to sunset. With this point in mind, let us look more closely at the prescriptions of the Mosaic law with regard to the feast of Passover. In the book of Exodus it is written: "you shall keep it [the lamb] until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs in the evening" (Ex 12:6). 'In the evening' here renders the Hebrew *bein ha-'arbayim* (literally: 'between the two settings'). The *JPS Torah Commentary* explains: "Rabbinic sources take this to mean 'from noon on.' According to Radak, the first 'setting' occurs when the sun passes its zenith just after noon and the shadows begin to lengthen, and the second 'setting' is the actual sunset."²⁵ Josephus testifies that the paschal lambs were sacrificed between 3:00 and 5:00 PM on the afternoon of the fourteenth of the month.²⁶ The paschal lamb was eaten during the night in between the fourteenth day and the fifteenth day: "They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it" (Ex 12:8). The feast then extended over the course of an entire week, during

²³ Aquinas, *Super Ioannem*, cap. 13, lec. 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 55.

²⁶ Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 6, 9, 3.

which unleavened bread continues to be eaten in place of leavened bread: “Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread... In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread, and so until the twenty-first day of the month at evening” (Ex 12:15, 18).

Now this easily gets confusing because of our long habituation to a solar calendar, but it is clear here that the seven days of unleavened bread are the fifteenth through the twenty-first inclusive, but beginning at sunset on the fourteenth and ending at sunset on the twenty-first. The Passover feast, therefore, falls properly on the fifteenth of Nisan and then extends another six days.²⁷ The eating of the paschal lamb takes place at the end of the fourteenth of Nisan according to a solar calendar which runs from midnight to midnight, or at the beginning of the fifteenth of Nisan according to a lunar calendar running from sunset to sunset.

On account of this ambiguity the feast of Passover is sometimes distinguished strictly from the feast of Unleavened Bread, so that properly speaking the Passover refers only to the fourteenth of Nisan, the day on which the lamb was killed and then eaten after nightfall, while the feast of Unleavened Bread then spans the seven following days from the fifteenth to the twenty-first of Nisan. Such a view looks, for example, to the Levitical prescription: “In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening, is the LORD’s passover. And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the feast of unleavened bread to the LORD; seven days you shall eat unleavened bread” (Lev 23:5–6). Josephus distinguishes the feasts this way: “The feast of unleavened bread succeeds that of the passover, and falls on the fifteenth day of the month, and continues seven days, wherein they feed on unleavened bread...”²⁸

More often, however, the whole week is called alternatively the feast of Passover or the feast of Unleavened Bread; and in fact, this seems more reasonable since the Passover does not properly begin until after nightfall on the fourteenth of Nisan, which in the Jewish way of reckoning is already the beginning of the fifteenth day, and therefore of the feast of Unleavened Bread. Likewise, the prohibition against the use of leaven extends precisely from the evening of the fourteenth of Nisan until the evening of the twenty-first, so that the eating of the paschal lamb is clearly encompassed within the seven day feast of Unleavened Bread. The Synoptic Gospels clearly

²⁷ Cf. Abram Kanof, “Passover”, in Cecil Roth, ed., *Encyclopædia Judaica*, vol. 13 (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), c. 163: “Passover, a spring festival, beginning on the 15th of Nisan, lasting seven days...”

²⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 3, 10, 5; cf. Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 57: “The focus is on the festival of matsot, unleavened bread. Without doubt, throughout the biblical period this remained a distinct celebration separate from the one-day paschal rite.”

follow this usage, mixing the terms interchangeably: “Now the feast of Unleavened Bread drew near, which is called Passover” (Lk 22:1; cf. Mt 26:17; Mk 14:1).

There is one more point worth noting with regard to the Jewish observation of Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread before we return to St Thomas’s solution of the apparent contradiction between the Gospels. In the Mosaic law it is written: “on the first day you shall put away leaven out of your houses” (Ex 12:15). We have already seen that the prohibition against eating leaven obtained from the evening of the fourteenth onwards. But when was it removed from the house? The *JPS Torah Commentary* is again informative: “Since festivals commence in the evening, this injunction has traditionally been taken to mean that the leaven must have been removed prior to the time for the paschal offering on the fourteenth of the month.”²⁹ In Jewish law the leaven is to be removed “at least two hours before noon on the eve of Passover.”³⁰ To this end a search for leaven (*bedikat hamets*) takes place after nightfall on the thirteenth of Nisan, and the leaven is disposed of on the morning of the fourteenth.

It should now be possible to understand precisely what each of the Evangelists writes about the day of the Last Supper. St Matthew says only that it was on the first day of Unleavened Bread when the disciples asked Jesus where they were to prepare the Passover, but St Mark and St Luke add that this is the day on which the lambs were sacrificed in the Temple. This would have occurred therefore during the daylight hours of the fourteenth of Nisan, which is referred to as the first day of unleavened bread because it is the day on which the leaven is removed from the house, and because the command to eat unleavened bread obtains from that evening forward. When St John, on the other hand, places the Last Supper “before the feast of the Passover” (Jn 13:1), St Thomas argues that he must be speaking in terms of the solar calendar according to which the feast of Passover falls on the fifteenth day, while the paschal lamb is eaten on the vigil. Thus the “supper” (Jn 13:2) takes place “before the feast of the Passover” (Jn 13:1). St Thomas writes:

John the Evangelist regards the Passover as that entire daytime which was celebrated, but not as the evening before, which was also celebrated. Thus he says, **before the feast of the Passover**. Consequently, it is clear that our Lord’s supper took place on the 14th day in the evening.³¹

In the English edition of St Thomas’s commentary on the Gospel of St John, the translator tries to clarify St Thomas’s meaning by

²⁹ Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 58.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Aquinas, *Super Ioannem*, cap. 13, lec. 1.

including in brackets an obscure comment after the words cited above: “the beginning of the 14th day, the day beginning in the evening.”³² It seems that the translator is trying to indicate that St Thomas should be understood to mean that St John’s Gospel places the Last Supper at the beginning of the fourteenth day according to the lunar calendar, which is the end of the thirteenth day according to the solar calendar. But this is precisely what the Greeks assert, and what St Thomas is clearly trying to overcome! No matter how simple the question is in reality, it is all too easy for those of us who reckon days differently to lose our way in these discussions. St Thomas uses our customary way of speaking when he says that the meal took place on the fourteenth day in the evening, which is also already the beginning of the fifteenth day according to the lunar calendar used by the Jews.

Let us move forward to the second difficulty presented by St John’s Gospel: “They themselves did not enter the praetorium, so that they might not be defiled, but might eat the passover” (Jn 18:28). Here again, as St Thomas laconically remarks, “a problem arises.”³³ Now one possible solution to this difficulty is that which St Thomas attributes to St John Chrysostom, namely that the Jewish leaders were so preoccupied with their orchestration of Christ’s death – and the Gospel accounts do seem to indicate that Jesus’s capture and his trials before Annas and Caiaphas occupied the whole of the night – that they failed to eat the Passover meal at the proper time that night, and therefore that they were still looking for an opportunity to eat it later that day, once Christ was dead. St Thomas rejects this on the basis of the Mosaic law which says that he who is prevented from keeping the Passover on the proper day, “he shall still keep the passover to the Lord. In the second month on the fourteenth day in the evening they shall keep it; they shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs” (Num 9:10–11). He argues that, if the Jews had failed to keep the Passover on the fourteenth of Nisan, they would have waited a whole month to eat it rather than eating it the next day. In the face of the apparent willingness of this particular group of Jewish leaders to bend or break laws as it suited their purposes, however, St Thomas’s reply to St Chrysostom is perhaps not altogether convincing.

Nevertheless, citing St Jerome, St Augustine, and other Latin fathers, St Thomas offers another explanation:

[T]he fourteenth day is the beginning of the feast; but the passover refers not just to that evening, but to the entire time of the seven days during which they ate unleavened bread, which was to be eaten by

³² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, ed. James A. Weisheipl, trans. Fabian R. Larcher (Petersham: St. Bede’s Publications, 2000), p. 271.

³³ Aquinas, *Super Ioannem*, cap. 18, lec. 5.

those who were clean. And because the Jews would have contracted uncleanness by entering the residence of a foreign judge, they did not enter so that they might not be defiled, but might eat the passover, that is, the unleavened bread.³⁴

For St Thomas, then, when St John says that the Jews wanted to be able to eat *to pascha* ('the Pasch'), he was referring not to the paschal lamb, but to the paschal bread. In fact, although St Thomas does not mention it here, we can find strong internal biblical evidence for this interpretation of St John's statement. The law against entering the dwelling-place of a gentile under pain of ritual impurity is found not in the Bible, but in the Talmud.³⁵ The key point here concerns the degree of defilement which the Jewish leaders would have incurred by entering the praetorium, and in particular the temporal duration of the impurity which they would have contracted. As the *Encyclopædia Judaica* explains:

Common to all purity rituals is the time factor: until the evening for the lesser degrees of impurity (e.g., Lev. 11:24, 25, 27) and seven days for the greater degrees (e.g., Lev. 12:2; with certain exceptions – the purity of the leper is dependant on his complete recovery).³⁶

The degrees of impurity work like this: the leper himself, for example, is unclean in the first degree, and things which he has contact with (cloths, buildings, etc.) are unclean in the second degree. In the case of leprosy, the second degrees also require seven or even fourteen days before that can become clean. A menstruating woman is also unclean in the first degree, while things that come into contact with her (persons, cloths, chairs, etc.) are unclean in the second degree. In this case, however, her uncleanness lasts for seven days, while those made unclean through contact are unclean only until nightfall. Touching a corpse also renders one unclean. He who touches the corpse directly is unclean for seven days, but he to whom the uncleanness is secondarily transferred (by coming into contact with the one who touched the corpse) is unclean only until evening. Normally, ritual impurity, which can be contracted in all sorts of ways, ceased at nightfall. The phrase 'unclean until [the] evening' appears twenty-seven times in Leviticus and five more times in Numbers. Lepers, blood-flow, death, and birth present exceptional cases. There is no reason to think that the Jews would have contracted anything more than the usual degree of ritual impurity by entering

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Talmud, *Oholoth* 18, Mishnah 7: "The dwelling-places of heathens are unclean." Cf. Mishnah 10: Among the places "not [subject to the laws] of heathen dwelling-places: . . . the open spaces of a courtyard."

³⁶ Editorial Staff, "Purity and Impurity, Ritual", in Cecil Roth, ed., *Encyclopædia Judaica*, vol. 13 (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), c. 1406.

the praetorium.³⁷ If the gentile himself is unclean in the first degree, the house of the gentile would be unclean only in the second degree, and the ritual impurity contracted thereby would cease at nightfall, thus presenting no obstacle to the eating of the Passover meal, since it was required for this to be eaten only after nightfall anyways. The Jews, therefore, if they wanted to avoid defilement in order to eat ‘the Pasch’, could only have been thinking about a ritual meal that they were to eat that day before nightfall, not after it, and therefore not the paschal lamb but the paschal bread.

Was there such a ritual meal prescribed for the evening of the fifteenth day of Nisan? Rabbi Hoffman has this to say about the Passover *chagigah*:

The Bible describes two types of sacrifices in connection with Passover, the paschal offering and the ‘sacred offerings.’ With regard to the first, Exodus (12:8) mandates that ‘they shall eat it [i.e., the Passover offering] roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs’ . . . According to Exodus, only animals from the flock (sheep or goats) could be used for the paschal sacrifice. The origins of the second sacrifice reach back to Deuteronomy 16:2, which states that the paschal offering could be drawn from either the flock or the herd (i.e., cattle). 2 Chronicles 25:13 tries to harmonize this contradiction [sic] by mandating two offerings, the paschal offering and what is called ‘sacred offerings.’ The Talmud refers to this second offering as the *chagigah* or festival offering of the fifteenth of Nisan, an obligatory sacrifice preferably offered on the first day of the holiday.³⁸

St Thomas’s interpretation relies on the fact, referred to here by the Rabbi, that the feast of Passover was celebrated at both ends, so to speak. Analogous to the Christian practice of first and second vespers, or to the common custom of eating especially festive meals both on Christmas Eve and on Christmas Day, St Thomas proposes that while the paschal lamb was eaten at the beginning of the paschal feast day the Jews speaking to Pilate were concerned about other paschal food to be eaten toward the end of the great feast day.

With regard to St John’s Gospel and the problem of its chronology, then, the only question here is this: when St John uses the word ‘Passover’ or ‘Pasch’ (*to pascha*), does he use it in a narrow sense as distinct from the feast of Unleavened Bread, or in a broad and inclusive sense, as the Synoptics evidently do? When he says that the Jews wanted to be pure in order to eat ‘the Pasch’, are we bound to take that strictly as referring to the eating of the paschal lamb after nightfall on the fourteenth, or might he mean it broadly in reference

³⁷ Ibid., p. 1412.

³⁸ Lawrence A. Hoffman and David Arnou, eds, *My People’s Passover Haggadah, Volume 1: Traditional Texts, Modern Commentaries* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2008), p. 38.

to the eating of the paschal foods which continued to be eaten the next day and throughout the week? Given the lack of evidence in favor of a strict usage, together with the above considerations about the cessation of ritual impurity at nightfall, there is good reason to think that St John uses the term broadly to include the entire week of feasting.

The third and last difficulty to be overcome in St John's account appears where he remarks that Jesus was condemned and crucified on "the day of Preparation of the Passover" (Jn 19:14). Interestingly enough, St Thomas does not treat this as a difficulty at all. No 'problem arises' here for him. To see why this may be so, let us look more closely at the Greek phrase which the Evangelist uses: *ēn de paraskeuē tou to pascha* ('but it was the parasceve of the pasch'). Now 'parasceve', which means 'day of preparation', is used consistently with reference to the Sabbath, such that it practically becomes a proper name for the sixth day of the week, Friday. This is how St Mark uses and explains the term: "And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation (*paraskeuē*), that is, the day before the Sabbath . . ." (Mk 15:42; cf. Mt 27:62; Lk 23:54). All four Gospels refer to the day of Christ's crucifixion as the 'Parasceve', although only St John calls it the 'Parasceve of the Pasch'. The question for St John, then, is this: does 'parasceve' mean the day which one spends preparing for the Passover, or does he use it, like the other Evangelists, simply to mean 'Friday'? If the latter, what of his addition 'of the Pasch'? To answer this, one need only recall that St John refers not to one day only, but to the whole seven day celebration as 'the Pasch', so that the 'Parasceve of the Pasch' may simply mean the 'Friday of the Paschal Week'. This would take away nothing from the fact that Friday of the Paschal Week was also the principal day of the feast that year.

This interpretation is also consistent with what St John writes later in the same chapter, where he says that: "Since it was the day of Preparation (*paraskeuē*), in order to prevent the bodies from remaining on the cross on the sabbath (for that sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away" (Jn 19:31). Together with the other Evangelists, John here describes the Friday of Christ's death as a day of preparation only in reference to the Sabbath. This particular Sabbath is indeed a 'high day', but this need not be taken to mean that it was the feast of Passover itself; that it is the Sabbath which falls within the Paschal Week would be reason enough to make it surpass other Sabbaths throughout the year in dignity and solemnity, somewhat as the Sunday which falls within the Octave of Christmas is now singled out by Roman Catholics as a special feast day in honor of the Holy Family.

One further point, which does not appear in St Thomas's argumentation, can be raised in defense of the historical veracity of the Synoptic chronology, and of the agreement of the Johannine chronology with it, despite initial appearances to the contrary. The Gospels of St Matthew and St Mark agree in bearing witness to the fact that Pontius Pilate had a custom of releasing a prisoner to the Jews "at the feast" (Mt 27:15; Mk 15:6). St John's Gospel records Pilate himself saying the same thing to the Jews: "But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover (*tō pascha*); will you have me release for you the King of the Jews?" (Jn 18:39). We must ask whether Pilate himself uses the phrase 'at the Pasch' broadly or strictly? If strictly, which would mean that the custom was to release a prisoner precisely on the principal day of the feast, the fifteenth of Nisan, then St John is shown to agree with the other Evangelists in making Friday the day of the Passover, and therefore also in making the Last Supper a true Passover meal on the vigil of the feast. If Pilate uses it broadly, which would mean that the custom was to release a prisoner at some point during the seven day feast, or perhaps even on its vigil, then this clearly shows that St John, who records Pilate's words without comment here, is at least familiar with the use of the term in its broader sense. In either case, the words of Pilate which St John recounts support the evident Synoptic chronology, which is also his own.

In conclusion, the whole possibility of reconciling the Synoptic and Johannine chronologies, therefore, with regard to the dating of the Last Supper depends upon only two fairly simple points: firstly, that St John (unlike the Synoptics) reckons the days as we do today, from midnight to midnight; secondly, that St John (like the Synoptics) refers to the whole seven day feast of Unleavened Bread as the Passover. Such is St Thomas Aquinas's solution, and it remains in our day no less sufficient and satisfying than it was in his. I would, therefore, respectfully submit to Papa Ratzinger that, contrary to Professor Meier's conclusion, one does not have to choose between the Synoptic and Johannine chronologies at all.

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