

The Paschal Supper

by Sir Robert Anderson

The date of the crucifixion is a crucial question in the Gospel narratives, and understanding the distinction between the Paschal Supper and the feast of Unleavened Bread is essential for evaluating the credibility of the Evangelists' accounts.

Scripture: Exodus 12:14, Exodus 12:51, Leviticus 23:5, Deuteronomy 16:9, Matthew 26:17, Luke 22:7, Luke 22:53, John 13:1, 2 Timothy 3:16

Topics: "Biblical Accuracy", "Last Supper"

Description

Sir Robert Anderson preaches about the trustworthiness of Gospel narratives, emphasizing the importance of accuracy in details to maintain the credibility of the Bible. He delves into the controversy surrounding the timing of the betrayal during the Paschal Supper, highlighting the unity in the testimony of the first three Gospels regarding the Last Supper being eaten at the Jewish Passover. Anderson addresses the confusion between the Paschal Supper and the feast that followed it, shedding light on the distinctions between the two and the significance of the events surrounding the crucifixion in relation to Jewish ordinances and laws.

Transcript

THE trustworthiness of witnesses is tested, not by the amount of truth their evidence contains, but by the absence of mistakes. A single glaring error may serve to discredit testimony which seemed of the highest worth. This principle applies with peculiar force in estimating the credibility of the Gospel narratives, and it lends an importance that can scarcely be exaggerated to the question which arises in this controversy, Was the betrayal in fact upon the night of the Paschal Supper? If, as is so commonly maintained, one or all of the Evangelists were in error in a matter of fact so definite and plain, it is idle to pretend that their writings are in any sense whatever God-breathed.[1]

1. theopneustos, 2 Timothy 3:16. See Browne's Ordo Saec., §§ 65- 70, for an exhaustive discussion of this question, in proof that "the three first Gospels are at variance on this point with the fourth." The matter is treated of in books without number. I here deal only with the salient points in the controversy. Arguments based upon the Sabbatical observance of the 15th Nisan being inconsistent with the events of the morning of the crucifixion are worthless. "To strain at a gnat and swallow a camel" was characteristic of the men who were the actors in these scenes. If any one have doubts of it, let him read the Mishna. And points such as that the Jews were forbidden to leave their houses on the night of the Supper, depend upon confounding the commands given for the night of the Exodus with the law relative to its annual

celebration. As well might it be urged that the Lord sanctioned and took part in a violation of the law because He reclined at supper, instead of standing girded and shod as enjoined in Exodus 12.

The testimony of the first three Gospels is united, that the Last Supper was eaten at the Jewish Passover. The attempt to prove that it was an anticipatory celebration, without the paschal sacrifice, though made with the best of motives, is utterly futile. "Now on the first day of unleavened bread" (St. Matthew declares),^[2] "the disciples came to Jesus, saying, Where wilt thou that we make ready for Thee to eat the Passover?" It was the proposal not of the Lord, but of the disciples, who, with the knowledge of the day and of the rites pertaining to it, turned to the Master for instructions. With yet greater definiteness St. Mark narrates that this took place on the first day of unleavened bread, when they killed the Passover. (Mark 14:12) And the language of St. Luke is, if possible, more unequivocal still:

"Then came the day of unleavened bread, when the Passover must be killed." (Luke 22:7)

But it is confidently asserted that the testimony of St. John is just as clear and unambiguous that the crucifixion took place upon the very day and, it is sometimes urged, at the very hour of the paschal sacrifice. Many an eminent writer may be cited to support this view, and the controversy waged in its defense is endless. But no plea for deference to great names can be tolerated for a moment when the point at issue is the integrity of Holy Writ; and despite the erudition that has been exhausted to prove that the Gospels are here at hopeless variance, none who have learned to prize them as a Divine revelation will be surprised to find that the main difficulty depends entirely on prevailing ignorance respecting Jewish ordinances and the law of Moses.

2. Matthew 26:17 (Revised Version). In the Authorized Version our translators have perverted the verse. It was not the first day of the feast, but *ta prota ton adzumon*, or, as St. Luke calls it, *ha hamera ton adzumon*, viz., the day on which leaven was banished from their houses, the 14th Nisan, on the evening of which the Passover was eaten.

These writers one and all. confound the Paschal Supper with the festival which followed it, and to which it lent its name. The supper was a memorial. of the redemption of the firstborn of Israel on the. night before the Exodus; the feast was the anniversary of their actual deliverance from the house of bondage. The supper was not a part of the: feast; it was morally the basis on which the feast was founded, just as the Feast of Tabernacles was based on the great sin-offering of the day of expiation which preceded it. But in the same way that the Feast of Weeks came to be commonly designated Pentecost, the feast of Unleavened Bread was popularly called the Passover.^[3] That title was common to the supper and the feast, and included both; but the intelligent Jew would never confound the two; and if he spoke emphatically of the feast of the Passover, he would thereby mark the festival to the exclusion of the supper.^[4]

3. See Luke 22:1., and compare Josephus, *Ant.*, 14:2, 1, and 17:9, 3: "The feast of unleavened bread, which we call the Passover."

4. Or if the emphasis rested on the last word, the distinction would be between Passover and Pentecost or Tabernacles.

No words can possibly express more clearly this distinction than those afforded by the Pentateuch in the final promulgation of the Law: "In the fourteenth day of the first month is the Passover of the Lord; and in the fifteenth day of this month is the feast."^[5]

5. Numbers 28:16, 17. Compare Exodus 12:14-17, and Leviticus 23:5, 6, and mark that in the enumeration of the feasts in the twenty-third chapter of Exodus, the Passover (i. e., the Paschal Supper) is omitted altogether.

Opening the thirteenth chapter of St. John in the light of this simple explanation, every difficulty vanishes. The scene is laid at the Paschal Supper, on the eve of the festival, "before the feast of the Passover";[6] and after the narration of the washing of the disciples' feet, the evangelist goes on to tell of the hurried departure of Judas, explaining that, to some, the Lord's injunction to the traitor was understood to mean, "Buy what we have need of against the feast." (John 13:29) The feast day was a Sabbath, when trading was unlawful, and it would seem that the needed supply for the festival was still procurable far on in the preceding night; for another of the errors with which this controversy abounds is the assumption that the Jewish day was invariably reckoned a *nukthameron*, beginning in the evening.[7]

6. John 13:1. The reader must carefully distinguish between verses such as this and those verses where in our English version the word "feast" is in italics, denoting that it is not in the original.

7. Such, for instance, was the day of atonement (Leviticus 23:32) and also the weekly Sabbath. But though the Passover was eaten between six o'clock and midnight, this period was designated in the law, not the beginning of the 15th Nisan, but the evening or night of the 14th (compare Exodus 12:6-8, and Leviticus 23:5). The 15th, or feast day, was reckoned, doubtless, from six o'clock the following morning, for, according to the Mishna (Treatise Berachoth), the day began at six o'clock a. m. These writers would have us believe that the disciples supposed that they were there and then eating the Passover, and yet that they imagined Judas was dispatched to buy what was needed for the Passover!

Such, doubtless, was the common rule, and notably in respect of the law of ceremonial cleansing. This very fact, indeed, enables us without a doubt to conclude that the Passover on account of which the Jews refused to defile themselves by entering the judgment hall, was not the Paschal Supper, for that supper was not eaten till after the hour at which such defilement would have lapsed. In the language of the law, "When the sun is down he shall be clean, and shall afterwards eat of the holy things." (Leviticus 12:7) Not so was it with the holy offerings of the feast day, which they must needs eat before the hour at which their uncleanness would have ceased.[8] The only question, therefore, is whether partaking of the peace offerings of the festival could properly be designated as "eating the Passover." The law of Moses itself supplies the answer: "Thou shalt sacrifice the Passover unto the Lord thy God of the flock and the herd...seven days shalt thou eat unleavened bread therewith." (Deuteronomy 16:2, 3, and compare 2 Chronicles 35:7, 8.)

8. Because the day ended at six o'clock. Moreover, we know from Jewish writers that these offerings (called in the Talmud the *Chagigah*) were eaten between three and six o'clock, and ceremonial uncleanness continued until six o'clock.

If then the words of St. John are intelligible only when thus interpreted, and if when thus interpreted they are consistent with the testimony of the three first Evangelists, no element is lacking to give certainty that the events of the eighteenth chapter occurred upon the feast-day, Or if confirmation still be needed, the closing verses of this very chapter give it, for according to the custom cited, it was at the feast that the governor released a prisoner to the people (John 18:39; Compare Matthew 27:15; Mark 15:6; and Luke 23:17). Fearing because of the populace to seize the Lord upon the feast-day, (Matthew 26:5; Mark 14:1, 2) the Pharisees were eager to procure His betrayal on the night of the Paschal Supper. And so it came to

pass that the arraignment before Pilate took place upon the festival, as all the Evangelists declare.

But does not St. John expressly state that it was "the preparation of the Passover," and must not this necessarily mean the fourteenth of Nisan? The plain answer is, that not a single passage has been cited from writings either sacred or profane in which that day is so described; whereas among the Jews "the preparation" was the common name for the day before the Sabbath, and it is so used by all the Evangelists. And bearing this in mind, let the reader compare the fourteenth verse of the nineteenth chapter of St. John with the thirty-first and forty-second verses of the same chapter, and he will have no difficulty in rendering the words in question, "it was Passover Friday." [9]

9. in de paraskeua tou pascha, compare vers. 31 and 42, and also Matthew 27:62; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54. Josephus (Ant., 16., 6, 2) cites an imperial edict relieving the Jews from appearing before the tribunals either on the Sabbath or after the ninth hour of the preparation day. It is unjustifiable to assert that the absence of the article in John 19:14 precludes our giving this meaning to the word paraskeua in that passage. In three of the other five verses cited the word is anarthrous, for in fact it had come to be the common name for the day, and the expression "Passover Friday" was as natural to a Jew as is "Easter Monday" to ourselves. (See Alford's note on Mark 15:42. Still more valuable is his explanation of Matthew 27:62.)

But yet another statement of St. John is quoted in this controversy. "That Sabbath day was an high day," he declares, and therefore, it is urged, it must have been the 15th of Nisan. The force of this "therefore" partly depends upon overlooking the fact that all the great sacrifices to which the 15th of Nisan largely owed its distinctive solemnity, were repeated daily throughout the festival. (Numbers 28:19-24) [10] On this account alone that Sabbath was "an high day." But besides, it was specially distinguished as the day on which the firstfruits of the harvest were offered in the temple; for in respect of this ordinance, as in most other points of difference between the Karaite Jews, who held to the Scriptures as their only guide, and the Rabbinical Jews, who followed the traditions of the elders, the latter were entirely in the wrong.

10. Numbers 28:19-24. Compare Josephus, Ant., 3:10, 5.

The law enjoined that the sheaf of the firstfruits should be waved before the Lord "on the morrow after the (paschal) Sabbath," (Leviticus 23:10, 11) and from that day the seven weeks were reckoned which ended with the feast of Pentecost. But as the book of Deuteronomy expressly ordains that the weeks should be counted from the first day of the harvest, (Deuteronomy 16:9; and compare Leviticus 23:15, 16) it is evident that the morrow after the Sabbath should not be itself a Sabbath, but a working day. The true day for the ordinance, therefore, was the day of the resurrection, "the first day of the week" following the Passover, [11] when, according to the intention of the law, the barley harvest should begin, and the first sheaf gathered should be carried to the Holy Place and solemnly waved before Jehovah. But with the Jews all this was lost in the empty rite of offering in the temple a measure of meal prepared from corn which, in violation of the law, had been garnered days before. This rite was invariably celebrated on the 16th of Nisan; and thus synchronizing with the solemnities both of the Paschal festival and of the Sabbath, that day could not fail to be indeed "an high day." [12]

11. The present Jewish calendar is so adjusted that the 14th of Nisan shall never fall upon their Sabbath (see Encyc. Brit., 9th ed., title, Hebrew Calendar); and this, doubtless, was so intended, for the duties of the day were inconsistent with the due observance of the fourth commandment. Therefore, the morrow after the Sabbath following would invariably be a working day, so that the law is perfectly consistent in

providing that the sheaf should be waved on the first day of the harvest. It is only, therefore, in a cycle of years that the true day for offering the first-fruits falls on the third day from the Passover; but in the year of the crucifixion, the great antitype, the resurrection of Christ from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23), occurred upon the very day Divinely appointed for the rite. It follows that the true day of Pentecost must always be on the first day of the week (see Leviticus 23:15, 16), and therefore in that same year the true Pentecost was, not the Sabbath day on which the Jews observed the feast, but the day which followed it, a fact which confirms the presumption that the designedly ambiguous word used in Acts 2:1, means "accomplished," in the sense of passed, and that it was when assembled on "the first day of the week" that the Church received the gift of the Holy Ghost.

12. In truth it could not but have been the greatest Sabbath of the year, and it is idle to pretend that this is not sufficient to account for the mention made of it.

The argument in proof that the death of Christ was on the very day the paschal lamb was killed, has gained a fictitious interest and value from the seeming fitness of the synchronism this involves. But a closer investigation of the subject, combined with a broader view of the Mosaic types, will dissipate the force of this conclusion. The distinctive teaching of Calvinism is based on giving an exclusive place to the great sin-offering of Leviticus, in which substitution, in its most definite and narrowest sense, is essential. The Passover, on the other hand, has ever been the most popular of types. But though the other typical sacrifices are almost entirely ignored in the systems of our leading schools of theology, they have no little prominence in Scripture. The offerings which are placed first in the book of Leviticus have a large share in the theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews, -- the new Testament "Leviticus," whereas the Passover is not even once referred to.[13] Now these Leviticus offerings[14] marked the feast-day, (Numbers 28:17-24) on which, according to the Gospels, "the Messiah was cut off."

13. The historical mention of the Passover in Hebrews 11:28 is of course no exception. It has no place in the doctrine of the Epistle.

14. The burnt-offering, with its meat-offering, the peace-offering (the chagigah of the Talmud), and the sin-offering (Leviticus 1:4).

And other synchronisms are not wanting, still more striking and significant. During all His ministry on earth, albeit it was spent in humiliation and reproach, no hand was ever laid upon the Blessed One, save in importunate supplication or in devout and loving service. But when at times His enemies would fain have seized Him, a mysterious hour to come was spoken of, in which their hate should be unhindered. "This is your hour, and the power of darkness," He exclaimed, as Judas and the impious companions in his guilt drew round Him in the garden. (Luke 22:53) His hour, He called it, when He thought of His mission upon earth: their hour, when in the fulfillment of that mission He found Himself within their grasp.

The agonies inflicted on Him by men have taken hold on the mind of Christendom; but beyond and above all these the mystery of the Passion is that He was forsaken and accursed of God.[15] In some sense, indeed, His sufferings from men were but a consequence of this; therefore His reply to Pilate, "Thou couldst have no power at all against Me, except it were given thee from above." If men seized and slew Him, it was because God had delivered Him up. When that destined hour had struck, the mighty Hand drew back which till then had shielded Him from outrage. His death was not the beginning, but the close of His sufferings; in truth, it was the hour of His triumph.

15. No reverent mind will seek to analyze the meaning of such words, save in so far as they testify to the great fact that His sufferings and death were in expiation of our sins. But the believer will not tolerate a doubt as to the reality and depth of their meaning.

The midnight agony in Gethsemane was thus; the great antitype of that midnight scene in Egypt: when the destroying angel flashed through the land. And as His death was the fulfillment of His people's deliverance, so it took place upon the anniversary of "that selfsame day that the Lord did bring the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt by their armies." [16]

16. Exodus 12:51. The Passover of the yearly celebration was but a memorial of the Passover in Egypt, which was the true type. It was killed, moreover, not at the hour of the Lord's death, but after that hour, between the ninth and the eleventh hour (Josephus, Wars, 6., 9, 3). "The elucidation of the doctrine of types, now entirely neglected, is an important problem for future theologians." This dictum of Hengstenberg's [Christology (Arnold's Ed.), § 765] may still be recorded as a deserved reproach upon theology, and much that has been written in this controversy might be quoted to prove its truth. The day of the resurrection was the anniversary of the crossing of the Red Sea, and again of the resting of the Ark on Ararat (Genesis 8:4). Nisan, which had been the seventh month, became the first month at the Exodus. (See Exodus 12:2; cf. Ordo. Saec., § 299.) On the 17th Nisan the renewed earth emerged from the waters of the flood; the redeemed people emerged from the waters of the sea; and the Lord Jesus rose from the dead.

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