

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 *Scripture* can be found here:

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

by removing the limitations and sufferings of our present state, as if they could only be the result of a primitive offence. For the Bible gives no authority for accepting such a principle.

If now we must sum up the conclusions which emerge from the analysis we have made so far, we can say that Scripture shows us divine justice being exercised at two different levels. First of all, in our present life a certain rough justice can be seen at work. Its reality can be more clearly felt in proportion as we consider a more important group and a longer period of time. It is from this reality that we are bound to deduce the existence of original sin : a state of separation from God, which causes in the whole race the act of separation freely committed by sinning. This limping justice is not, moreover, the sole principle which explains the facts of man's condition : alongside it room must be found for God's plan of testing and educating his creatures. After the present life retribution will be administered according to merits, a retribution no longer crude and irregular, but enjoying a perfect delicacy, subtlety and precision. No inspired author has made an explicit application of this latter principle to original sin.

A. M. DUBARLE, O.P.

Le Saulchoir

THE DATE OF THE LAST SUPPER

The date of the Last Supper is one of the most notorious difficulties in the New Testament. The synoptic gospels describe it as a Paschal meal, while John tells us that the Jews were to eat the Pasch the next day, the day Our Lord died—they refused to enter Pilate's court lest they be defiled and so debarred from eating the Pasch. Commentators have generally been content to opt for either John's date or that of the synoptics, and then to suggest explanations of how the other dating came about. Another solution, attempting to justify both methods of dating, was to suggest that there may have been two ways of reckoning the Pasch, and that Our Lord was following one, described by the synoptics, and the 'Jews' who put Our Lord to death were following another, and it is to this that St John refers. This theory would certainly be very convenient, if true ; but it sounds rather too convenient—as if, in fact, it were invented in order to solve the difficulty. Certainly the arguments hitherto used to support it have failed to carry conviction. Recently, however, new arguments

have been brought forward which it is suggested give an objective foundation to the theory. The arguments are based on the Dead Sea Scrolls.¹

It has long been recognised that the calendar was a point on which the Qumran sect felt very strongly; this was one of the points on which they were fiercely opposed to the official Jewish priesthood, and several passages in the documents exhort their followers to preserve jealously their own calendar and their own manner of reckoning the liturgical feasts. They even refer to the book on which their calculations are to be based—it is the *Book of Jubilees*, many fragments of which were found at Qumran. Without entering too much into technicalities concerning this calendar, we can say this much: the year was a solar year of exactly 364 days, which divided up into exactly 52 weeks—which means that 1 January would always be the same day of the week; if the year began on a Monday, the next year would begin exactly 52 weeks later on a Monday again. Further, the year was neatly divided into four parts, each having two months of 30 days plus one of 31 days; again, an exact number of weeks (13 each quarter), so that each quarter would begin on the same day of the week. In other words, if we knew the day on which any feast fell in any year, we could immediately tell on what day of the week it would fall in any other year. Now, by a series of complicated calculations (which we certainly will not go into, see note 1), it has been worked out that the year, according to this calendar, began on a Wednesday, and that the Pasch also fell on a Wednesday.

What is the history of this calendar? It seems probable that it is an old priestly calendar—how old, it is as yet impossible to say. In Hasmonian times the ordinary lunar calendar of 365 days was adopted. This gradually became current, but seemed like apostasy to the more zealous among the Jews, another lapse into hellenist ways. Among such circles the older calendar would remain current, and even, as we see from the Qumran documents, be a source of violent disagreement from the official priesthood.

Now how does this affect our reading of the gospels? According to the Old Testament the paschal lamb had to be eaten on the evening of the 14th Nisan, the next day, the 15th, being the Pasch, a feast which continued for a week. On the first and seventh days no servile work was permitted. The same week was also the feast of the Azymes—on the afternoon of the 14th Nisan the house was scrupulously

¹ The originator of this theory is A. Jaubert; for more detailed information the reader is referred to her articles, 'La date de la dernière Cène,' in *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, cxlvi (1954), 140-73; 'Le Calendrier des Jubilés et de la Secte de Qumran,' in *Vetus Testamentum*, iii (1953), 250-64. The latter is summarised in *Theology Digest*, v (1957), 67-72. It is discussed by E. Vogt in *Biblica*, xxxvi (1955), 408-13.

cleared of leavened bread, and throughout the week unleavened bread only was permitted. Now all the evangelists agree that Our Lord died on a Friday, the eve of the Sabbath. But for John this day was the 14th Nisan, since the Jews were to eat the paschal victim that night. For the synoptics, on the other hand, Our Lord and His disciples have already celebrated the paschal meal, 'on the night on which he was betrayed' (1 Cor. 11:23); this day, then, was for them the 14th Nisan. The difficulty is solved if we allow that the synoptics are describing the sequence of events according to a calendar similar to that of Qumran; while St John describes events according to the official Jewish calendar, which the Jewish authorities would be following in order to bring out the symbolism of Our Lord, the paschal victim. Thus following the Qumran dating, Our Lord and the disciples ate the paschal meal on Tuesday evening before the Pasch, the 15th Nisan, a Wednesday; for the Jews, Friday evening was the 14th Nisan, the evening on which the paschal meal was to be eaten.

This immediately offers a solution to other difficulties also. In the first place, it must be recognised that the events described in the gospels are with difficulty squeezed into the course of one night and a morning: the paschal meal, the arrest at Gethsemane, the double trial before the Jews, the trial before Pilate, with a visit to Herod followed by another session before Pilate; and only finally the sentence, procession to Calvary and death.¹ It is of course not absolutely impossible to fit them into the time-scheme which has become traditional, a period of only some fifteen hours; but it is very much easier if we can allow two whole days for the events, from Tuesday evening to Friday afternoon. Further, according to the Mishna, capital cases must be tried during the daytime, and, moreover, sentence could only be passed in a separate session. Hitherto it has either been said that this rule was not in force at the time of Our Lord (the Mishna is a second-century document, though it embodies earlier traditions), or that the Jews in their haste to do away with Our Lord acted illegally. But if we accept the present suggestion, there is once more ample time to allow for all the formalities of the law. Finally, this theory fits perfectly with another curious discrepancy between the synoptics and John. Mark describes the anointing of Our Lord at Bethany after the words, 'The Pasch was to take place after two days'; John says that this anointing took place six days before the Pasch. If we allow that this anointing took place on Saturday, then the Pasch which Mark has in mind is

¹ Mark (15:25) gives the note that Our Lord was crucified at 'the third hour.' This is another difficulty in the chronology of the Passion which the present theory helps to dispel. But since it is not insoluble by other means—see the commentaries *ad loc.*—it seems to be an unnecessary complication to deal with it here.

indeed two days later, and at the same time it is six days before the official Jewish Pasch which St John describes.

The main objection to this would seem to be the completely novel interpretation of the gospel account of Our Lord's last day, or days, on earth. In spite of the disagreements mentioned—particularly the nature of the Last Supper—it has always seemed that all four evangelists agree in packing the last events into the few hours between the last meal and his death the following afternoon. And now we are supposed to say that these events actually took several days. Does this fit with the gospel narrative? In considering this difficulty two factors should be remembered. First, we must bear in mind that the gospels in their present form are not free and original compositions. They are not the beginning but the end of a fairly long process of preaching, teaching and collection of various traditions. The Passion-history itself is probably one of the earliest parts of the gospel to be formed, probably to explain the scandal of the cross and to bring out the central doctrine of the Resurrection. But this narrative would probably be quite brief and simple in its original form; and in the course of time other elements would be added to it—added, moreover, without much in the way of careful reshaping and editing but rather merely by means of insertion. Take the incident at Bethany just referred to. Mark 14 begins with a reference to the plotting of the Jews; the story of the anointing follows, but there is no organic connection between this story and the preceding two verses; in fact it interrupts the next step in the plot, the collaboration of Judas. Luke, for example (22:1-3), links the two closely together, omitting the story of the anointing (a similar incident to which he has already given in 7:36-50). It seems quite likely that this story of the anointing was inserted at a later stage of the gospel formation, after the bare bones of the Passion-history—plot, betrayal, trial, death—were already formed. Now the same is probably true of other incidents in the present form of the gospel of the Passion.¹ And while this by no means discredits the trustworthiness of these 'secondary' elements, it does mean that we can allow ourselves more latitude in estimating their historical connection with the main thread of the story.

In any case, of course—this is the second consideration—the main purpose of the evangelists was not to give an historically connected account. This is a statement which must be understood very carefully. It does not mean that the evangelists were not concerned to give a factual account of what happened. But they were not concerned to

¹ For the 'criticism' of the Anointing at Bethany, see V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (1953), 529 f.; for his discussion of the whole chronology of the Passion, see 524 f., and Additional Note J, 653-64.

give a history, a chronicle, a diary of the events as they happened. Their main purpose was theological—what precise theological point they had in mind may be stated with slight variations by different interpreters,¹ but there is no doubt about the main fact. The evangelists are not writing history for the sake of history; they are writing history, but for the sake of the theological meaning which God has inserted into it. This means that although they will neither invent facts nor falsify the facts at their disposal, they will feel a certain liberty in their arrangement of the facts and in their manner of telling them, and will be relatively unconcerned with precise details of place and time. This happens continually throughout the gospels. Quite early on in Our Lord's life Matthew describes three conflicts with the Pharisees (Matt. 12:1-30)—when the disciples were plucking ears of corn, when he healed the man with the withered hand, and 'then' when he cast out the devil from the dumb man. Luke agrees with Matthew for the first two incidents, but gives the third very much later, during his journey to Jerusalem (Luke 11:14-23). No-one would accuse either evangelist of being untrustworthy—neither of them is concerned primarily with the precise historical sequence of events, and Matthew's 'then' is not to be taken too literally; it means simply, the next incident which he chooses to narrate. And the same is true of the history of the Passion. The evangelists are intent on the history of salvation; the incidents they narrate are selected and arranged with this in mind; and considerations of chronology are of secondary and negligible importance.

The evangelists, therefore, will agree on the main facts—that Our Lord was betrayed, tried by the Jewish authorities, found guilty of nothing else than of being the Messiah, handed over to the Roman governor and condemned to die. This is sufficient for their main theological purpose. They will not then be very much concerned with details—when exactly the trial took place, how many trials there were, when exactly the various details took place (denial of Peter, insulting by the priests), how long the trial before Pilate took and so on. They will even feel free to describe these details from different points of view—Luke's account of Peter's denial is different from that of the other gospels. They will feel free to pass over one or other of them—only Luke tells us of the visit to Herod, only John tells us about the visit to Annas. We need not feel any difficulty, therefore, about accepting a theory which demands expanding the compressed account of the Passion given in the gospels. We should expect to find that it

¹ As an example of different ways of looking at the theology of salvation in the New Testament itself, see the articles by D. M. Stanley, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, xviii (1956), 231-54; 345-63.

has been compressed ; and in fact, as we have already seen, we should already have suspected that it was unduly compressed and be far from unwilling to find some means of relieving the pressure.

The chronology of the Passion, then, on the basis of the gospel account combined with the Qumran calendar, would be as follows :

Saturday night : anointing at Bethany (' two days ' before Mark's Pasch ; ' six days ' before John's).

Sunday : solemn entry into Jerusalem, Palm Sunday ; return to Bethany.

Monday : return to Jerusalem, cursing the fig tree on the way.

Tuesday : to Jerusalem again ; fig tree withered ; preparation of the Pasch ; Last Supper, which was a paschal meal according to their calendar, but not for the Jewish authorities who were therefore free to arrest Our Lord that night in Gethsemane and take him to the house of Annas. It is probably during this night session that Peter's denials took place, so that at the end, as he was being led off for the next stage, at cock-crow, the Lord turned and looked at Peter (Luke 22:61).

Wednesday : at cock-crow, plenary session of the court before Pilate. Probably here, when the formalities were over, the mockery of Our Lord took place.

Thursday : another session of the court early in the morning, merely to pass sentence according to the Mishna ruling ; Our Lord taken to Pilate, who after a preliminary inquiry sent him on to Herod.

Friday : second appearance before Pilate ; this was the 14th Nisan according to the official calendar, so the Jews refused to enter Pilate's court ; the whole morning given up to wrangling before Pilate, the incident of Barabbas, the scourging and condemnation ; and finally, the Crucifixion.

This interpretation is so novel that some people will be inclined to condemn it on that ground alone ; ' Untraditional,' they will say firmly and consider that this is sufficient condemnation. But is it so untraditional ? The *Didascalia Apostolorum* (a work of about the third century which incorporates even earlier documents) bears traces of a similar tradition. It explains the fast days of Holy Week by connecting them to the various events of the Passion, which it describes in the following order : on *Tuesday* evening the Last Supper, then the arrest of Our Lord ; *Wednesday*, detention in the house of Caiphas and council of priests ; *Thursday*, appearance before Pilate, by whom he was kept in prison that night ; and *Friday*, Pilate condemns him and delivers him up to be crucified. The author is obviously aware of the difficulty arising from John's statement that the Friday was the day

when the Pasch was to be eaten, and offers a far-fetched explanation of how this came about ; but this does not modify the importance of his *independent* witness to a four-day chronology of the Passion. His statement, moreover, is taken up by Epiphanius in the fourth century. Epiphanius clearly depends on the *Didascalia*, but it would be very surprising if he accepted this tradition on the sole grounds of this one source. One might well, then, suspect that the tradition was rather more widespread than our present documentation reveals. This idea receives confirmation from the fact that Victorinus of Pettau, who died in 304, accepts the same tradition in his *De Fabrica Mundi*, and clearly without dependence on the *Didascalia*. Not very much evidence, one might say. But the important thing to notice is that it is completely independent of the gospels ; this tradition could not have arisen from a reading of the gospel texts—and it must have an origin somewhere. Whereas the whole body of contrary tradition, holding the normal chronology of a Last Supper and arrest on the Thursday night followed by trial and death on the Friday, is entirely based on the gospel text. Now we have already seen that the gospel text does not necessarily demand this interpretation and is not irreconcilable with a longer chronology ; therefore the tradition which depends on the gospel text is likewise not necessarily binding. A tradition which depends on the gospel text cannot be used to support that text itself. Moreover, since the shorter chronology is the natural and simple way of regarding the gospel account, if there were no other evidence to the contrary, it can quite easily be understood that a tradition which at first sight appeared to conflict with the gospel account should fairly soon have disappeared. We hear no more of it, explicitly, after Epiphanius in the fifth century.

It will be agreed that this theory offers a better solution to the difficulties of the gospel text than any other so far suggested. It does not depend on any arbitrary alteration of the date of the Pasch by either Our Lord or the Jewish authorities, but rests on the evidence of a calendar we know did exist. But it cannot yet be said to have been proved conclusively. In the first place, the calendar on which it rests was that of the community of Qumran ; but we do not know that Our Lord and his disciples followed it. Against this it should be admitted that there is a steadily growing body of evidence which points to fairly close contact between the Qumran sect and early Christianity. We need not say that this contact was direct and immediate ; nor do we need to say the same concerning the calendar. It would be sufficient to say that the Qumran documents show us that there were ideals and ideas current in Israel in the first century which are not reflected in the documents of official Judaism ; and that it is quite possible that Christianity drew its first followers from circles

which had at least as much in common with these 'marginal' elements as with official Judaism. In other words, we do not need to say that Our Lord followed the calendar of Qumran; all we need to say is that we now know there was such a calendar, that it may well have been current in other places besides the Qumran community, and that Our Lord may have followed this body of opinion which preferred the ancient priestly calendar to the later official civil calendar. It must be admitted, however, that the words 'may be' occur rather too often in such an explanation for us to be quite certain about it.

A second point on which we would like further explanation is the question of intercalated days. Even in our year of 365 days we have to insert an extra day every few years in order to make up for the fact that the year is actually slightly longer than 365 days. In a year of 364 days the difference between the days and the seasons of the year would become more noticeable even more quickly than in our year. This would be of particular importance in a calendar which was meant to preserve the regularity of the liturgical feasts, when those feasts were so closely connected with the seasons. If the year were computed inflexibly according to 364 days, there would come a time when they were celebrating the offering of first fruits before the seed was even sown. Moreover, if they were to preserve the regularity of the recurring days (New Year's day always falling on the same day of the week), it could not be a question of inserting merely one day, as we do in our calendar. At least a complete week, if not a complete month, would have to be inserted. Now we have as yet no information how or when this was done. Therefore, in spite of the apparent mathematical certainty of the computation of the Qumran calendar, we cannot be absolutely sure of the occurrence of any given feast in any given year. We know that the Pasch, the 15th Nisan, would certainly be a Wednesday; but we do not know if it would necessarily be in the same week as the official Jewish 15th Nisan.

For the moment, then, this theory must remain no more than a very attractive possibility.

L. JOHNSTON

Ushaw

THE REMISSION OF SINS—II

4 *Remission of sins through penitential practices* Judging by the writings of the early fathers it seems undeniable that the question of how the grave sins committed after Baptism were to be forgiven created something of a dilemma; not, be it clearly stated, in the sense