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## The Date of the Last Supper

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# Notes and Comment

## *The Date of the Last Supper*

Assuredly it was not on Thursday that our Lord ate the passover... but on Tuesday. That is why the Church commemorates His captivity on Wednesday... So do not think it was on Thursday evening He was taken prisoner.

Saint Epiphanius

**W**AS the Last Supper held on a Tuesday, rather than a Thursday evening? Surprising as it may sound to us who have been commemorating the "Lord's Supper" on Holy Thursday all the years of our lives, the question is not an idle one nor is it new. It was discussed in the time of Saint Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis in Cyprus who died in the year 403. He provides us with the earliest known testimony to the Church's custom of holding the liturgical commemoration of the Last Supper on Thursday of Holy Week. He mentions the custom, only to disapprove of it. In the words quoted in the epigraph above, he gives with characteristic vigor and self-assurance his own opinion; it was not on Thursday that our Lord ate the passover, but on *Tuesday* evening.

But Saint Epiphanius' opinion, whatever its intrinsic merits, did not prevail. It died and was buried, to be mounded over like so many other "historical" theories with the accumulated dust of the ages. Little is heard of it after the fifth century. But in

our own day it has been resurrected. Certain statements in the manuscripts discovered near the shores of the Dead Sea have raised the problem of the date of the Last Supper once again. And Saint Epiphanius has found more than one champion among modern scholars to defend his position.

Mademoiselle Annie Jaubert, professor at L'Ecole des Hautes Etudes de Paris, in an article which appeared in the *Revue de l'histoire des religions* in 1954, proposed a theory which maintains that although our Lord suffered and died on a Friday, He ate the passover for the last time with His disciples on Tuesday evening of Holy Week.<sup>1</sup> The Reverend Ernst Vogt S.J., Rector of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, considers the Jaubert theory "worthy of serious consideration."<sup>2</sup> In the following pages an attempt has been made to give a brief summary of (1) the underlying problem which occasioned the new theory; (2) the arguments adduced in its support; (3) the changes such a theory would require in our traditional concept of the sequence of events in the last week of our Lord's life upon earth.

#### THE UNDERLYING PROBLEM

The source of the problem concerning the date of the Last Supper is to be found in the apparently conflicting accounts given by the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) on the one hand and the Gospel of Saint John on the other. Saint Mark who may be taken as representative of the synoptic tradition tells us:

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the paschal lamb, His disciples said to Him: "Where do you want us to go and get things ready for you to eat the passover?... The disciples went, and came into the city, and when they had found things as He had told them, they prepared the passover. When evening came, He arrived with the Twelve. (Mark 14.12, 16, 17)

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<sup>1</sup> A. Jaubert "La date de la dernière Cène" *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 146 (1954) 140-173. An earlier article discussed at length the calendar of the Book of Jubilees; "Le Calendrier des Jubiles et de la Secte de Qumran. Ses origines bibliques" *Vetus Testamentum* 3 (1953) 250-264.

The first article appeared in an English summary in *Theology Digest* 5 (1957) 67-72.

<sup>2</sup> E. Vogt S.J. "Antiquum Kalendarium Sacerdotale" *Biblica* 36 (1955) 403-408; and "Dies Ultimae Coenae Domini" *ibid.* 408-413.

According to this tradition, it would seem that our Lord ate the passover before He died. In the Gospel of Saint John however, we are told:

They (the Jews) therefore led Jesus from Caiaphas to the praetorium. Now it was early morning and they themselves did not enter the praetorium to avoid being defiled, *since they wanted to eat the passover.* (John 18.28)

The verse describes events which occurred *after* our Lord had eaten the Last Supper with His disciples. Yet John says that the Jews, who were holding Christ prisoner, would not enter the praetorium, because by entering a pagan's dwelling they would contract ritual defilement, which would prevent them from eating the passover. According to John therefore, our Lord was put to death *before* the time of the Jewish passover meal, whereas the synoptics seem to say He was put to death *after* it.

This apparent contradiction in the gospel accounts has been recognized from the earliest times, and various theories have been advanced in the course of the centuries to resolve it. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to discuss them all. But one of the more satisfactory explanations has been to suppose that at the time of our Lord there were different ways of reckoning the date of the passover among the Jews themselves. Jaubert's theory accepts this explanation, and lends it precision and substantiation. It maintains that around the beginning of the Christian era there were two liturgical calendars in use among the Jews. According to one of these calendars the passover was fixed, so that every year it began on a Tuesday evening; according to the other the passover was a movable feast and so could fall on any day of the week; in the year our Lord died it happened to begin on a Friday evening. Our Lord, Jaubert claims, followed the first calendar. He ate the passover on Tuesday evening, was taken captive later that same night, and after imprisonment and trial lasting through Wednesday and Thursday, was crucified on Friday. His Jewish captors mentioned in the Gospel of John, however, followed the second calendar, celebrating their passover meal on Friday evening, after having had our Lord executed earlier that same day.

#### THE ARGUMENTS

The arguments adduced in support of the new theory are drawn from both Jewish and Christian sources. The Jewish writ-

ings to which appeal is made are principally the apocryphal books of Jubilees and Henoch and the manuscripts of the Qumran community. The Christian sources are the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the writings of Epiphanius of Salamis and Victorinus of Pettau.

The steps in the argument may be briefly indicated thus:<sup>3</sup> There are good reasons for maintaining that disagreement existed among the Jews of our Lord's time concerning the date of the passover. This difference can be traced to the use of two different liturgical calendars, one of which placed the beginning of the passover every year on Tuesday evening. This fact, coupled with traces of an early Christian tradition, make it likely that our Lord Himself celebrated the passover on Tuesday.

Let us consider the argument more in detail. Even before the discovery of the manuscripts at Qumran, it was generally accepted as a fact that in the last century of the pre-Christian era disagreement had existed among Jewish factions and sects concerning the correct dating of feast and fast days. Theodor Gaster writes: "Variant calculations of the calendar were a regular bone of contention among normative Jews and dissident sects, as also between Jews and Samaritans."<sup>4</sup> This has been confirmed by the Qumran documents. "Since the publication of the very first manuscripts it seemed clear that the Qumran community belonged to a sect which was zealously attached to a particular liturgical calendar and that this calendar was one of the motives for the sect's opposition to the Jerusalem priesthood."<sup>5</sup> Several statements in the Manual of Discipline would be pointless except on the supposition that such disagreement did exist.

For example, at the very beginning of the Manual, we read: "They must not deviate a single step from carrying out the or-

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<sup>3</sup> This presentation of the argument is not simply a summary of Jaubert's nor does it follow the same order as hers. She begins with a discussion of the Christian sources. The other articles consulted in preparing this summation were: Juan Leal S.J. "La nueva fecha de la Cena" *Estudios Eclesiasticos* 31 (1957) 173-188 and J. Delorme "Jesus a-t-il pris la derniere Cene le mardi-soir?" *L'Ami du Clerge* 4 avril 1957 218-223 and 11 avril 1957 229-234. Much too has been drawn from Father Vogt's articles, cf. note 2.

<sup>4</sup> Theodor Gaster *The Dead Sea Scriptures in English Translation* (New York 1956) 93 note 5.

<sup>5</sup> Delorme *op. cit.* p. 219.

ders of God at the times appointed for them; they must neither advance the statutory times nor postpone the prescribed seasons." (1/13-15). And the Damascus document states: "Those who wish to enter the new covenant must return to the law of Moses, for in it all things have been clearly defined; the accurate computation of the seasons, in contrast with the blindness of Israel in these matters, has been set forth in the Book of the Division of Seasons according to their Jubilees and Weeks."<sup>6</sup>

These documents, belonging to a Jewish religious movement contemporary with the time of our Lord, evidence concern and solicitude about the observance of the seasons and feasts *at the proper time*. The Damascus document, if it has been accurately rendered above, also implies that "Israel" was not computing the seasons correctly. It refers to a "Book of the Division of Seasons" in which the correct computation can be found. The book referred to is almost certainly an apocryphal Jewish writing called the Book of Jubilees. Fragments of nine different manuscripts of the Book of Jubilees have been found in the Qumran caves. It was evidently held in high esteem by the community.

The Book of Jubilees, written by an unknown Jewish author sometime around 150 B.C., and the Book of Henoch, composed even earlier, both make mention of a liturgical calendar. In both books the passages concerned with this calendar are polemical in tone. They appear to be propagandizing in its favor and defending its use. The natural inference to be drawn is that the calendar in question was somehow under attack, that a different calendar was being introduced or had been introduced among the Jews.

What could have occasioned such a change? It has been suggested that the change of calendars was one of the effects of the Seleucid occupation of Palestine. In the division of his vast empire which followed upon the death of Alexander the Great, Palestine passed for a time under the control of Egypt. But in the year 198 B.C. the Seleucid dynasty of Syria put an end to Egyptian domination and assumed control of Palestine. The Jewish inhabitants were then subjected to an intense campaign of hel-

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<sup>6</sup> As is well known, the Damascus Document, or as some prefer to call it the Zadokite Document was not one of those discovered in the caves near the Dead Sea. It has been known for some years, having been discovered around the turn of the century in Cairo, Egypt. But it belongs to the same religious movement as the Dead Sea scrolls, and reflects accurately the beliefs and practices of the Qumran community.

lenization, which reached its peak under the notorious Antiochus Epiphanes. The Syrian overlords attempted to impose their own hellenistic culture and civilization upon their newly acquired subjects. One of the things thus imposed upon the Jews was the hellenic lunar calendar. In the Book of Daniel (7.25) we read of an attempt by Antiochus "to change the *times* and the law." After initial resistance, the calendar was accepted by the mass of the people and was eventually adopted by the religious leaders even for the reckoning of feasts and fasts.

A small group of zealots however, in a spirit of fidelity to their ancient religious traditions, resisted all attempts to hellenize them. It was this group that fought for the retention of the old calendar or, as it has been called, the priestly calendar. Among the adherents of the old calendar were the author of the Book of Jubilees and the sectaries of Qumran. "It can be considered as established, that the community of Qumran separated from official Judaism, among other reasons, in order to remain faithful to the calendar advocated in the Book of Jubilees."<sup>7</sup>

The priestly calendar of the Book of Jubilees was a solar calendar. It divided the year into exactly fifty-two weeks in such a way that every year began on exactly the same day of the week, Wednesday. All religious festivals therefore would recur on the same day each year. The passover, it is claimed, every year according to this calendar began on Tuesday evening. A discovery at Qumran, made known only after Jaubert had proposed her theory, lends striking support to this contention. As reported by B. Schwank in *Benediktinische Monatschrift*, a calendar was discovered in Cave 4 at Qumran which clearly mentions a passover meal on a Tuesday evening.<sup>8</sup>

Thus far the Jewish sources. They appear to establish with a fair degree of certainty (1) that disagreement did exist among Jews of our Lord's time concerning the dates of religious feasts; (2) that different liturgical calendars were in use; and (3) that according to one of those calendars the celebration of the passover meal every year was held on Tuesday evening.

Did our Lord Himself follow this calendar? Are there any positive indications in early Christian writings which would sup-

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<sup>7</sup> Delorme *op. cit.* p. 221.

<sup>8</sup> Schwank's article is summarized in *New Testament Abstracts* 2 (1957) #26.

port the view that the Last Supper was held on Tuesday rather than on Thursday evening of Holy Week?

The prevailing custom of holding the liturgical commemoration of the "Lord's Supper" on Thursday cannot be traced back beyond the latter part of the fourth century. Even at the beginning of the fifth century, according to Jaubert, Holy Thursday was not celebrated at Jerusalem although prayers and a Mass were held on Tuesday at the Mount of Olives. As we have seen, the earliest testimony to the custom of holding the liturgical commemoration of the Last Supper on Thursday is to be found in the writings of Saint Epiphanius dating from the second half of the fourth century. And Saint Epiphanius does not approve of the custom. He judges it to be misleading. "Assuredly," he says, "it was not on Thursday that our Lord ate the passover... but on Tuesday. That is why the Church commemorates our Lord's captivity on Wednesday... So do not think that it was on Thursday evening that He was taken prisoner."<sup>9</sup>

A similar tradition is found in the work known as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (The Teachings of the Apostles). Chapter 21 of the *Didascalia* presents a schematic outline of the sequence of events in the week of the Passion. On Tuesday, so it affirms, our Lord ate the passover and was taken prisoner; on Wednesday He was kept under guard in the house of Caiaphas while the princes of the people deliberated on His fate; on Thursday He was handed over to Pilate who detained Him in the Roman prison; on Friday the Jews presented their charges before the tribunal of Pilate and later that same day had Christ put to death.

The author of the *Didascalia* is unknown. At one time, as the title indicates, it was attributed to the Apostles. It appears to have originated in Syria early in the third century. Mention of it occurs for the first time in the writings of Epiphanius who himself seems to have believed in its apostolic origin. It may very well be that Epiphanius' sole reason for taking the stand he did on the correct date of the Last Supper was this work, the *Didascalia*, to which he attributed apostolic authority.

There is another witness however to the Tuesday tradition who seems to be independent of the *Didascalia*. Victorinus of Pettau, bishop of a diocese in what is now southern Austria, lived

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<sup>9</sup> Fragment edited by Holl in *Festgabe für A. Julicher* (1927) pp. 160-164 as cited in *Biblica* 36 (1955) 410.



and died a century earlier than Epiphanius. In a work of his entitled *De fabrica mundi* he asserts: "...on Wednesday our Lord was taken prisoner by wicked men." Since according to the Jewish way of reckoning the day, Wednesday begins at sundown on Tuesday evening, Victorinus' testimony can be considered as favoring the new theory.

It was stated above that the custom of holding the liturgical commemoration of the Last Supper on Holy Thursday cannot be traced back beyond the fourth century. There is however a strong tradition dating from the second century which places the Last Supper itself—not its liturgical commemoration—on Thursday evening. The problem therefore arises: Which is the older, the Tuesday tradition or the Thursday tradition? It is difficult to say. Father Vogt is inclined to consider the Tuesday tradition more ancient. Admittedly it is hard to see how it could ever have arisen, once the Thursday tradition had become current. For the Thursday tradition does seem to have the clear support of the Passion narratives in the gospels. Indeed it is possible that it is based exclusively on a *prima facie* interpretation of the synoptic accounts.

The synoptic gospels seem to allow barely twenty-four hours for the events of our Lord's Passion from the time of the Last Supper till His death and burial. Consequently, if Christ died on Friday (which seems incontestable) then the Last Supper must have been held on Thursday evening.

Two things however are to be noted: First, the gospels nowhere explicitly state that the Last Supper was held on a Thursday, nor even that it took place the night before Christ died. True, in the Canon of the Mass, there is a prayer which begins with the words, "*Qui pridie quam pateretur...*" ("Who, on the day before He suffered, took bread into His holy and venerable hands...") But there is no explicit scriptural warrant for that statement. St. Paul, it is interesting to observe, when describing the Last Supper, in a context in which he might easily have used the same words as the Mass prayer, does not do so; instead He says "...the Lord Jesus, *on the night in which He was delivered up*, took bread and giving thanks, broke and said, 'This is my Body...'" (I Corinthians 11.24)

The second point to be kept in mind is that the gospels, as well as the catechesis of the primitive Church, were much more

interested in the substance of what happened than in chronological sequence. The gospel narrative at times places events in succession one after the other, which when they originally occurred were separated by a considerable lapse of time. The gospels are often episodic, abbreviated, telescopic in their accounts. One notable example of this "telescoping" of events is the synoptics' record of our Lord's public life. The events as the synoptics recount them seem all to have occurred within the span of a single year. Yet it is practically certain that our Lord's public life lasted two, perhaps three years. Consequently, it is not at all impossible that the synoptics' account of the Passion has compressed the events of two and a half days into the space of twenty-four hours; that the Passion which seems to have begun on Thursday evening with the Last Supper and capture at Gethsemane, really began on Tuesday evening.

And that in essence is what the new theory would maintain.

#### THE EVENTS OF HOLY WEEK ACCORDING TO THE NEW THEORY

The final events of our Lord's life according to this new theory would follow a sequence something like this:

*Tuesday*      Evening: The Last Supper, a passover meal, on the first day of Unleavened Bread according to the old calendar. (Mark 14.12)

                 Night: Jesus is taken prisoner, led to Annas, then to Caiaphas, in whose house He spends the remainder of the night under guard.

*Wednesday:* First meeting of the Sanhedrin. "When day broke, they gathered together the elders and brought Jesus into their council." (Luke 22.16) Many witnesses are questioned. Christ admits He is the Messiah, and is charged with blasphemy. He is imprisoned for the rest of that day in the prison of the Jews.

*Thursday:* Second session of the Sanhedrin: "When day broke all the princes conspired together to have Him put to death." (Matthew 27.1, Mark 15.1) The sentence of death is formally passed by the Sanhedrin, and Christ is led off to Pilate.

First trial before Pilate. Thence He is led by the soldiery to the court of Herod, is questioned, mocked and remanded to Pilate. He spends the night in the Roman prison.

*Friday:* Second session before Pilate. On the eve of the great feast according to the official calendar, Pilate offers to release Christ, but the Jews call for Barabbas. There follow the scourging, crucifixion and death of our Lord.

#### CONCLUSION

In order to pass judgment upon the new theory, it is necessary to break it down into its component parts. It involves, in the first place, the contention that at the time of Our Lord different liturgical calendars were in use among the Jews, one of which fixed the date for the passover meal as Tuesday evening every year. This contention seems fairly well established and the arguments adduced in its support appear convincing.

Then there is the further contention that Our Lord Himself celebrated the passover meal on a Tuesday evening and in so doing may well have been following the calendar mentioned above. This is possible and probable. It solves rather neatly the underlying problem which, as was pointed out in the early part of this paper, occasioned the new theory. But the arguments supporting it are not too convincing.

Finally there is the reconstruction of the events of Holy Week on the basis of a Tuesday date for the celebration of the Last Supper. Weak points in such a reconstruction do not necessarily weaken the case for the Tuesday tradition.

Perhaps the best way to conclude a summary such as this is to echo the wise word of warning with which Father Delorme ends his article. "Let us hope," he says, "that popularization of this new theory does not run ahead of scholarly research." For the new theory on the date of the Last Supper is still a theory. Much research remains to be done. It enjoys a certain amount of probability, and for that reason is "worthy of serious consideration." But it is not yet a proven fact. And it would therefore be unwise to speak or write of it as if it were.

JOSEPH J. KAVANAGH