

4 in the world” (13:1c); and finally, 3) *The continued love for them to that point in time*—“He loved them unto the end” (13:1d). When the next verse addresses the meal, notice how it does so, “And supper being ended, the devil having already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray Him” (John 13:2). After just talking about Jesus’ continuing love, the Holy Spirit then moves to address the object of His love whose actions would most test that love—Judas.

The form of the opening phrase of John 13:2 in Greek is something called the *genitive absolute*.⁸ This grammatical construction can only be translated into English by supplying prepositions or adverbs which complete the meaning and fit the context. The judgment of a translator plays a huge role in how such a text is rendered. This passage could begin with any one of the following words, *with, when, as, while*, etc. In addition to this, in the second word in the *genitive absolute* construction (*ginomai* meaning “to become” or “happen,”) there is a single letter textual variant in which some manuscripts have the letter *epsilon* and some have the letter *iota*. This single letter changes the form from an aorist participle (“having happened”) to a present participle (“happening”). This variant is reflected in the King James reading “being ended” in contrast to the American Standard reading

“during.” *What does this tell us about the Passover?* The fact that John begins 13:1 speaking of what happened “before the feast of Passover” doesn’t demand that we understand the *genitive absolute* introduction to the events of the meal as taking place “before the feast of Passover.” John first describes some events that happened before the Passover (13:1) and then moves to discuss what happened *at the Passover* (13:2). It is clear that John passes over some events. He does not mention the institution of the Lord’s Supper—perhaps because the Synoptic Gospels all address it). John jumps to a discussion of events of the evening of the meal in order to elaborate in greater detail upon other things that took place during the Passover.

When all these things are considered together it becomes clear that there is no conflict between the accounts of the Gospel writers, in spite of the challenge that it presents to us all four Gospels are in harmony. While the critic of faith will be quick to make assumptions and use their assumptions to discredit Scripture, the believing student should train themselves to carefully analyze the words (and silence) of Scripture. In most (if not all cases) the puzzles we face rest on our own misunderstanding of the text, not the words of Scripture itself.

By Kyle Pope

⁸ “The genitive absolute expresses time, cause, condition, concession, or simply any attendant circumstance” (*Greek Grammar*. Herbert Weir Smyth. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976, 459).

Faithful Sayings

Olsen Park Church of Christ

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10:20 a.m.
6:00 p.m.
Wednesday: 7:00 p.m.

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Dating Passover—And The “Last Supper”

The student of the Gospels occasionally confronts wording in the different accounts of the Evangelists which (at first glance) seems to contradict the account of other writers. If such problems are not resolved, the way is left open for critics of faith to discredit the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. Believers as well, may be led to doubt the faith they hold so dear. In most cases, these puzzles boil down to our own misunderstanding of the text and can be resolved with some careful examination of the details of various accounts. The practice of harmonizing Scripture can train us to avoid assumptions that that are often at the heart of such misunderstandings. A good example of this is seen in what the Gospels record concerning the events leading up to the final meal which Jesus ate with His disciples.

The problem starts at Bethany, where Jesus came before His death. In the context of discussing the anointing at Bethany, Mark says, “After two days it was the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Mark 14:1). Two verses after this Mark relates the anointing, in which a woman of the city anointed His feet with fragrant oil. John, however, begins this section, “Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead” (John 12:1). John then leads right into the account of the anointing. *Is one account setting the anointing two days before Passover and another six days before*

it? (Let's come back to this a little later).

The next problem comes when the meal takes place. Both Matthew and Mark set the meal and the disciples preparation of the house "on the first day of the feast of unleavened bread" (Matthew 26:17), "when they killed the Passover" (Mark 14:12). John, on the other hand, begins the discussion of the meal by saying, "Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end" (John 13:1). He then moves directly into the meal setting, declaring, "and supper being ended..." (John 13:2). *Is John saying this meal was not on Passover night in contradiction of the other accounts?* (We'll come back to this also).

Finally, during Jesus' trial, John records two statements which add to the puzzle. First, he records a statement about the Jewish leaders, "Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas to the Praetorium, and it was early morning. But they themselves did not go into the Praetorium, lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover" (John 18:28). After Jesus is scourged by Pilate, John writes, "Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" (John 19:14). The other Gospels clearly record Jesus having already eaten the

Passover with the disciples (Luke 22:15). *Is John placing Jesus' trial before the Jewish leaders had eaten the Passover meal, on the day when the Jews prepared their houses for the Passover? How do we unravel this puzzle?*

This is not a puzzle that is easily resolved. Many different attempts have been made to harmonize these accounts. Dan King in his commentary on the Gospel of John lists examples of seven different explanations (of varying merit) that have been offered to solve this puzzle (263-8).¹ One interesting theory was first offered by the French Scholar Annie Jaubert.² Based on evidence from Qumran, Jaubert argued that different calendars were recognized in Palestine among the Jews. If Jesus and His disciples followed a calendar like that used at Qumran the Passover might have come before the Passover recognized by the Temple at Jerusalem. If so, the difference between John and the other Gospels is an issue of which calendar was being used as the reference point. Jaubert's theory is interesting but not universally accepted. Sacha Stern argues that there is not sufficient evidence to prove that there were different calendars in widespread use in the time of Jesus.³

The answer may not be as complicated as it seems. Barry Smith in his essay *The Chronology of the Last Supper*, argues that the issue rests on understanding Biblical

terminology.⁴ Smith shows the fact that in both Biblical and extra-Biblical texts, "Passover" can refer to the one day feast and to the seven day "Feast of Unleavened Bread" which followed it.⁵ During these days festival meals were eaten each night. That means that the Jewish leaders' refusal to enter the Praetorium "that they might eat the Passover" could refer to any meal during the "Feast of Unleavened Bread" which was also called the Passover. Smith further documents the fact that the term *paraskeue* translated "Preparation Day" in John 19:14 is regularly used of the day before the Sabbath day.⁶ That means that the phrase "Preparation of the Passover" (KJV) refers the day before the Sabbath, that fell during the Feast of Unleavened bread (which was also called the Passover). Smith does not address the issue of the dating of Bethany, nor John's phrase "before the feast of the Passover" (13:1) immediately before recounting the events of the meal. *How do these two pieces fit into the puzzle?*

A good practice in Bible study is to constantly ask what a text *does* and *does not* say. It is easy to jump to conclusions when the text itself does not present what my brother, Curtis Pope, likes to call an "inescapable conclusion." The Bethany texts are a case in point. *Does John say the anointing was six days before Passover?* No! What the text says, is "six

days before Passover Jesus *CAME TO* Bethany" (John 12:1, emphasis mine). Then, after this statement, the account of the anointing is introduced with the Greek word *oun* meaning "then, therefore, accordingly, consequently, these things being so" (Thayer). *Oun* simply refers to the next thing that happened which John chooses to discuss. It doesn't have to mean that the meal took place on the same day that Jesus came to Bethany.⁷ By contrast, Mark describes a succession of events. At a time in which, "after two day was the Passover" (Mark 14:1a), the Jewish leaders conspired to kill Jesus (Mark 14:1b). This took place when Jesus was, "in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper" (Mark 14:3). This tells us that the anointing at Bethany took place two days before the Passover, and Jesus came to Bethany six days before the Passover (or four days prior to this).

That brings us to the final piece of the puzzle—John 13:1. The same careful examination of the text clears away some assumptions. *What does John say happened "before the feast of Passover"?* Note three things: 1) *Jesus' knowledge of His departure*—"Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father" (13:1b); 2) *Jesus' love for His disciple*—"having loved his own which were in

¹ Dan King. *The Gospel of John*. Bowling Green, Kentucky: Guardian of Truth Foundation, 1998. 263-8.

² Annie Jaubert. *The Date of the Last Supper*. Trans. I. Rafferty. Staten Island, New York: Alba House, 1965. Also, "The Calendar of Qumran and the Passion Narrative in John," in *John and the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Ed. James H. Charlesworth. New York: Crossroad, 1991, 62-75.

³ Sacha Stern. "Qumran Calendars: Theory and Practice," in *The Dead Sea Scrolls in their Historical Context*. Eds. Timothy H. Lim, Larry W. Hurtado, A. Graeme Auld and Alison Jack. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000, 179-186. Also, "Rachel Elior on Ancient Jewish Calendars: A Critique." *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 5 (2000) 287-92.

⁴ Barry Smith. "The Chronology of the Last Supper." *Westminster Theological Journal* 53:1 (1991) 29-45.

⁵ See Luke 22:1; Mark 14:12; Ezek. 45:21 and Josephus. *Antiquities of the Jews*, 14.2.1.

⁶ See John 19:31 where it is clear this is "Preparation Day" before the Sabbath—identified as a "High" Sabbath because it fell during the Passover/Feast of Unleavened Bread celebration. Also, Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54 and Josephus. *Antiquities of the Jews*, 116.6.1.

⁷ *Oun* "does not always furnish a strictly causal connection, but may be used more loosely as a temporal connective in the continuation or resumption of a narrative" (*A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. F. Blass, A. Debrunner and Robert Funk. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961, 234-5).