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978-0-521-51755-3 - The Mystery of the Last Supper: Reconstructing the Final Days of Jesus

Colin J. Humphreys

Excerpt

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## I Four mysteries of the last week of Jesus

On a faraway spring morning, in a remote corner of the Roman empire, soldiers crucified a Galilean Jew known as Jesus of Nazareth. No doubt the ruling authorities believed he would be quickly forgotten, a mere blip in history, one of many hundreds they had crucified. Yet, almost two thousand years later, Jesus is widely recognised as one of the most important persons who has ever lived; many would say *the* most important person.

Arguably the week in which Jesus died is the most momentous week in the history of the world. Probably more has been written about this week ('Passion Week' or 'Holy Week') than about any other week in history. There are probably more paintings of the crucifixion than of any other historical event (for example, see fig. 1.1). However, there is a problem. Our main sources of information about the last week of Jesus, the four gospels, appear to contradict each other. The purpose of this book is to present new information that reveals that the four gospels in fact give a remarkably coherent account of the last days of Jesus. This enables us to reconstruct these days in detail. The new information presented in this book also throws new light upon our understanding of the words and actions of Jesus.

Richard Dawkins, the former Professor for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, writes: 'Although Jesus probably existed, reputable biblical scholars do not in general regard the New Testament (and obviously not the Old Testament) as a reliable record of what actually happened in history ... The only difference between *The Da Vinci Code* and the gospels is that the gospels are ancient fiction while *The Da Vinci Code* is modern fiction ... What I, as a scientist, believe (for example, evolution) I believe not because of reading a holy book but because I have studied

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Fig. 1.1 The Three Crosses. Etching by Rembrandt in 1653. The Bible was Rembrandt's most important source of inspiration.

the evidence.'<sup>1</sup> As this book considers the evidence, we will see if it is really true that 'the only difference between *The Da Vinci Code* and the gospels is that the gospels are ancient fiction while *The Da Vinci Code* is modern fiction'.

Let me introduce myself. I am both a scientist and someone who has studied the Bible. In 2009, I gave an invited talk at a major international biblical conference (the Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting in New Orleans), and ten invited talks at international scientific conferences, in locations ranging from Japan to India. I have published in leading biblical journals, such as *Vetus Testamentum*, and leading scientific journals, such as *Nature*. Like Dawkins, I believe in the importance of evidence and this book is evidence-based. I have used a combination of historical and scientific reasoning to see what can be deduced about the last supper and the last days of Jesus by taking

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into account all the available evidence, not only from the New Testament, but also from the Old Testament, the Dead Sea Scrolls, ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, Roman and Jewish texts and the use of astronomy to reconstruct Jewish calendars. I have consulted widely with leading biblical scholars and an eminent London barrister, who is skilled in assessing evidence.

As Dawkins says, many reputable biblical scholars do not regard the New Testament as a reliable record of what really happened. A major reason is the apparent discrepancies in the gospels concerning the last days of Jesus. If the gospels cannot agree on key events such as the date of the crucifixion and the date and nature of the last supper, then why should we trust them at all? However, if it can be shown that the gospels do, in fact, agree on these issues, this removes an important basis for the scepticism of many scholars.

I am writing this book for both the general public and biblical scholars. The main text is aimed at the general public and assumes no specialist knowledge. The 'Notes' section at the end of the book, in which I dig more deeply into difficult or contentious issues and where I give full references, will be relevant to biblical scholars and theologians. I conclude each chapter with a summary section and the main conclusions of the book are brought together in Chapter 13.

If you read the accounts of the last days of Jesus in the four gospels, you will find that there are a number of places where they appear to contradict each other. For example, Matthew, Mark and Luke claim that the last supper Jesus held with his disciples was a Passover meal, whereas John states that the last supper, and also the trials of Jesus and his crucifixion, all took place *before* the Passover meal. It is because of problems such as this that many biblical scholars believe that the four gospels are full of contradictions and discrepancies.

Could it be, however, that the gospel accounts of the last days of Jesus are *not* filled with discrepancies, but that *we* are failing to understand the gospel writings because of *our* lack of knowledge of life in Israel in the first century AD? Is it *our* ignorance that is preventing us from interpreting some key verses in the gospels in the way the writers intended? These apparent discrepancies lead to some major mysteries

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surrounding what really happened to Jesus in the days before his crucifixion that have never been solved. So what are these mysteries? Let me outline four of them.

##### 1 The lost day of Jesus

There can be no doubt that the last days of Jesus were of supreme importance to the gospel writers.

Matthew devotes seven chapters (21 to 27; about 25 per cent of his gospel) to describing what Jesus did and said in the week leading to his crucifixion. The same week constitutes over 30 per cent of Mark's gospel, about 20 per cent of Luke and almost 40 per cent of John. Despite this mass of information, when biblical scholars try to reconstruct what happened on each day of this week, many find there is a 'missing day' when nothing seems to have happened at all. This is the Wednesday before the Friday crucifixion. For example, the widely used New International Version (NIV) Study Bible analyses the events on each day of Jesus' last week and writes: 'Day of rest: Wednesday: Not mentioned in the Gospels.'<sup>2</sup>

This is curious. The Jewish day of rest was on the Sabbath, which ran from Friday evening to Saturday evening. Would Jesus really have taken an *additional* day of rest shortly before he died? It is clear from the gospels that he was very busy in the last week before his crucifixion. Even if Jesus had spent all day in prayer on this day, surely at least one of the gospels would have mentioned it. Why then a 'missing day'? So this is the first mystery of the last week of Jesus: what did Jesus do, or what happened to him, on 'lost Wednesday'?

##### 2 The problem of the last supper

The second mystery is the relation between the last supper and the Jewish Passover. The last supper is one of the most famous meals in history. Every week millions of Christians throughout the world commemorate it, calling this special occasion the Lord's Supper, the Mass, the Eucharist, the Breaking of Bread or Holy Communion.

The last supper is described in all four gospels, and the meal plus the words of Jesus at the end occupy as many as 226 gospel verses. Yet there is a problem. Matthew, Mark and Luke explicitly state that the

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last supper was a Passover meal. On the other hand, the gospel of John equally clearly says that the last supper was held *before* the Passover meal. John Meier, who is the author of the major historical study of the life of Jesus in recent times, writes: 'The Synoptics [Matthew, Mark and Luke] and John are in direct disagreement over the nature of the last supper as a Passover meal and over the date of Jesus' death.'<sup>3</sup> The Passover meal was, and still is, easily the most important meal in the year for Jewish people. It is the occasion which commemorates the exodus of the Israelite slaves from Egypt and the birth of Israel as a nation. At this meal, parts of the book of Exodus are read and the story of the original Passover is recounted and celebrated. For these reasons the Passover meal is much more important for Jews than Christmas dinner is for most Christians. Jewish people would *never* be mistaken about whether a meal was a Passover meal or not.

The first Christians probably started to celebrate the last supper shortly after Jesus died. For example, the apostle Paul, writing in about AD 55 to the church at Corinth, refers to their *existing* commemoration of the last supper and reminds them how it should be celebrated (1 Corinthians 11:17–34). Most scholars believe the gospels were written in their final form in the period AD 60 to AD 100, but from earlier sources. The gospel writers should have known whether the last supper was commemorating a Passover meal. So why do Matthew, Mark, Luke and John apparently disagree? Although the gospels were probably written in their final form after AD 60, we should not forget the words at the start of Luke's gospel: 'Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word' (Luke 1:1). Luke is claiming *eye-witness sources*. Eye-witnesses would have known whether the last supper was a Passover meal or not.

The problem of the nature of the last supper has been well known to scholars for centuries. There has been no agreement, so today half of the world's churches use unleavened bread in their commemoration of the last supper, believing it to have been a Passover meal in which unleavened bread was used (Exodus 12:8), whereas the other half use leavened bread because they believe the last supper was held before the

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Passover meal. So the second mystery of the last week of Jesus is whether the last supper was a Passover meal or not.

### 3 No time for the trials of Jesus

The third mystery of the last week of Jesus is that it seems there was not enough time for the trials and all the other events the gospels record between the arrest of Jesus and his crucifixion. The gospel writers differ in the events they record as happening between the last supper and the crucifixion. I have listed them in the table in the *exact* order they occur in each gospel.

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Events between the last supper and the crucifixion in the order recorded in each gospel

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Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Last supper	Last supper	Last supper	Last supper
Mount of Olives	Mount of Olives	Mount of Olives	Olive grove
Gethsemane	Gethsemane		
Jesus prayed	Jesus prayed	Jesus prayed	
Disciples fell asleep	Disciples fell asleep	Disciples fell asleep	
Jesus prayed	Jesus prayed		
Disciples fell asleep	Disciples fell asleep		
Jesus prayed	Jesus prayed		
Disciples fell asleep	Disciples fell asleep		
Jesus arrested	Jesus arrested	Jesus arrested	Jesus arrested Taken to Annas Peter's first denial Questioned by Annas
Taken to Caiaphas	Taken to High Priest	Taken to High Priest Peter denies 3 times Cock crows	Taken to Caiaphas Peter denies twice more Cock crows

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Trial before Sanhedrin	Trial before Sanhedrin	Trial before Sanhedrin	
Peter denies 3 times	Peter denies 3 times		
Cock crows	Cock crows		
Jesus passed to the guards	Jesus passed to the guards		
Sanhedrin meet	Sanhedrin meet		
Trial before Pilate	Trial before Pilate	Trial before Pilate	Trial before Pilate
		Trial before Herod	
		Trial before Pilate	
Release of Barabbas	Release of Barabbas	Release of Barabbas	Release of Barabbas
Jesus flogged	Jesus flogged		Jesus flogged
Soldiers mock Jesus	Soldiers mock Jesus		Soldiers mock Jesus
			Condemned by Pilate
Simon carries cross	Simon carries cross	Simon carries cross	
Crucifixion	Crucifixion	Crucifixion	Crucifixion

Why do the gospel accounts of the events between the last supper and the crucifixion differ? If you read different newspaper accounts of the same event, for example the tragic September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the USA, what you find is that different newspapers tell the same overall story but they give different details. For example, one paper may tell how a New York fireman made a brave rescue from the World Trade Center buildings while another paper may omit this story but tell us the height of the buildings. In order to reconstruct the most complete picture of what happened on September 11, it is necessary to put all the reports together. Similarly, in order to reconstruct what happened in the life of Jesus, we need to put together the information in the different gospels. The four gospels give us four portraits of Jesus. Like four artists painting the same scene, but each from a different position and perspective, each gospel gives us a different view of the life of Jesus.

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The table on pages 6–7 shows that the gospels of Matthew and Mark record very similar events. Many scholars believe that Mark is the earliest gospel and that Matthew used Mark as a source (some scholars believe the reverse). Luke's gospel omits some events in Matthew and Mark, and adds some new information. However, Matthew, Mark and Luke are broadly similar and they are often called the synoptic gospels.<sup>4</sup> John's gospel, on the other hand, was probably written last and often differs from the synoptics. He leaves out a great deal of the information in the synoptics, and introduces a significant amount of new material. There is an immediacy in the writings of the synoptic gospels, whereas John is more reflective and theological. However, just because John's gospel is more theological than the synoptics, this does not mean that it is less historically factual.

What I find remarkable about the list of events given in the table is the high measure of agreement between the gospels in the overall order of events, even though different gospels omit different events. The apparent exception to this is Peter's three denials and the associated cock crows (I will return to this in Chapter 12). This means either that each gospel writer must have taken considerable care to get the order of events right, or that each 'inherited' an already well-established order of events which was passed down to him. Either way, the agreement of the four gospels on the order of the events between the last supper and the crucifixion is impressive.

What about apparent minor contradictions in the table? For example, after the last supper, Matthew and Mark describe Jesus' going to the Mount of Olives and then to a place called Gethsemane, but John has Jesus going to an olive grove. These apparent contradictions disappear if you know Aramaic, since the word *Gethsemane* is Aramaic for 'oil press', a place for squeezing the oil from olives. Putting information from the four gospels together, we can deduce that, after the last supper, Jesus and his disciples went to the Mount of Olives (Matthew, Mark and Luke), so-called because of the many olive trees growing on this mountain, as they still do today, and they went to an olive grove there (John), where there was a place for squeezing the oil from the olives (the Gethsemane of Matthew and Mark). So there is no contradiction; rather the gospels are telling us



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complementary information, which when put together enables us to build up a more complete picture of where Jesus and his disciples went after the last supper.

If we apply the same reasoning and put together all the events listed in the gospels as occurring between the last supper and the crucifixion, then we obtain the following list.

Last supper  
 Mount of Olives  
 Gethsemane  
 Jesus prayed  
 Disciples fell asleep  
 Jesus prayed again  
 Disciples fell asleep again  
 Jesus prayed a third time  
 Disciples fell asleep a third time  
 Jesus arrested  
 Taken to Annas  
 Peter's first denial and first cock crow  
 Interrogation by Annas  
 Taken to Caiaphas  
 Peter's second and third denials  
 Cock crows again  
 Trial before the Sanhedrin  
 Jesus handed over to the guards  
 Jesus before the Sanhedrin again  
 Trial of Jesus before Pilate  
 Trial before Herod  
 Trial before Pilate again  
 Pilate releases Barabbas  
 Jesus is flogged  
 Soldiers mock Jesus  
 Condemned by Pilate  
 Simon carries Jesus' cross  
 Crucifixion of Jesus

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Here comes the problem. Biblical scholars and Christians throughout the world believe that the last supper started after sunset on Thursday night and that the crucifixion of Jesus happened the following morning, Friday, at about 9 a.m. (the third hour, Mark 15:25, counting from sunrise). The trials of Jesus before the Sanhedrin,<sup>5</sup> Pilate and Herod all occurred in different parts of Jerusalem. Scholars have literally rushed around Jerusalem with a stop-watch to see how all the events recorded in the gospels could have fitted between Thursday night and Friday morning. Most conclude that it is impossible.

**4 The legality of the trials**

In order to try to fit in all the events between the last supper on Thursday evening/night and the crucifixion at about 9 a.m. the following morning, scholars are agreed that the main trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin must have been at night. However, the Jewish rules regarding trials for capital cases do not allow this. They are stated in the Mishnah (a compendium containing regulations attributed to about 150 rabbis who lived from about 50 BC to about AD 200): 'In capital cases they hold the trial during the daytime and the verdict must also be reached during the daytime . . . In capital cases a verdict of acquittal may be reached the same day, but a verdict of conviction not until the following day' (*Mishnah Sanhedrin* 4.1).

If these legal rules, written down in about 200 AD but based on earlier practice, applied at the time of the trials of Jesus, then they present a major challenge to the conventional understanding of these trials. As Geza Vermes, Professor Emeritus at Oxford University, states: 'It is hard to imagine in a Jewish setting of the first century AD that a capital case would be tried at night.'<sup>6</sup>

So we have four major problems with the last days of Jesus. First, there is lost Wednesday: a day on which nothing seems to have happened. Second, there is the Passover puzzle: was the last supper a Passover meal or not? Third, there is not enough time between a Thursday evening last supper and the crucifixion at 9 a.m. on Friday to fit in all the events described in the gospels. Fourth, the trials would seem blatantly to flout Jewish legal proceedings, yet although the gospels claim that there were many false witnesses at the trials, not