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

Colin J. Humphreys

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The Mystery of the Last Supper

Apparent inconsistencies in the gospel accounts of Jesus' final week have puzzled Bible scholars for centuries. Matthew, Mark and Luke clearly state that the last supper was a Passover meal, whereas John asserts that it occurred before the festival. The gospel narratives also do not seem to allow enough time for all the events recorded between the last supper and the crucifixion, whilst indicating that Wednesday was a 'missing day' on which Jesus did nothing. Colin Humphreys presents a compelling fresh account of how these inconsistencies can be explained, drawing on evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls and Egyptian texts and using astronomy to reconstruct ancient calendars. In doing so, Humphreys proposes a new theory – that the last supper took place on a Wednesday, rather than Thursday as traditionally believed – and successfully unifies the supposedly contradictory gospel stories.

Sir Colin J. Humphreys is Professor and Director of Research at the Department of Materials Science and Metallurgy at the University of Cambridge. He is the author of *The Miracles of Exodus* (2003).

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Foreword

For the past few years I have been following with keen interest and excitement the researches of Colin Humphreys into the last supper narratives in the gospels. Previously he had investigated the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and the ten unusual happenings recorded as accompanying that event. He also offered a new identification of the 'star of Bethlehem' as a comet that appeared in 5 BC. Finally, he made a fresh attempt to date the crucifixion of Jesus by using astronomical evidence for determining the likely year and also by proposing that Peter's reference in his Pentecost speech to the moon being turned to blood (Acts 2:20) was to a lunar eclipse in AD 33 at which the moon would indeed have had a blood-red appearance.

This new book returns to this last theme and offers a detailed study of the associated puzzles caused by the apparent discrepancy between the gospel of John and the other three gospels on the date of the last supper of Jesus. Colin's solution is a new version of the old theory that different Jewish groups may have used different calendrical systems, together with a proposal that Jesus held his meal not on the Thursday immediately preceding his crucifixion on the Friday but on the Wednesday evening, a view that allows a more adequate period of time for all the recorded events that have to be fitted in between the meal and the crucifixion.

The result is what is sometimes called a *tour de force*, an unusually capable feat of bringing together a vast amount of detailed evidence and showing how there is one complex solution that can account for it all. (Sometimes I have the feeling that people use this phrase when they cannot help admiring the skill and knowledge displayed in the operation but nevertheless find the hypothesis to be 'highly ingenious but ultimately not successful'. That negative implication should not be read into my remarks here.)

The breadth and depth of learning here is quite remarkable in that the author is Professor of Materials Science in Cambridge, and he

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studies biblical history as a leisure sideline, showing wide-ranging competence in astronomy (aided here by a professional), ancient calendrical studies and biblical scholarship. But difficult subject-matter is treated in a simple and readable manner so that the non-expert can easily follow the argument. The author's enthusiasm carries the reader along almost effortlessly. Frequent summaries help to chart the path that is being followed.

Many people (such as some members of the Jesus Seminar in North America) still hold that the gospel accounts of the life and death of Jesus are implausible and unhistorical to various degrees. But current biblical scholarship is producing a series of lengthy, learned works by professionals who are united in holding that much of the story can be accorded a much higher level of historical reliability when assessed by the appropriate methods. I need only mention the monographs produced by Richard Bauckham, James Dunn, Martin Hengel (and his collaborators), Craig Keener, John P. Meier and Tom Wright, and the symposia edited by Darrell Bock and Robert Webb and by Stanley Porter and Tom Holmen. These are works of technical scholarship each running to very many pages and beyond the reach of the public generally. By contrast Colin Humphreys is writing in much shorter compass and with great clarity for a wider audience.

A very considerable part of what he says in this book would certainly command wide if not total assent among scholars. His demonstration that the last supper and crucifixion must be dated to either AD 30 or AD 33 confirms what experts generally hold, and his preference for the latter date is powerfully argued. His view that there were different calendars side by side at the time of Jesus is not new but is a carefully argued variant based on a new evaluation of the evidence. His redating of the last supper to a Wednesday shows that he is not afraid to challenge traditional opinions that are of questionable validity.

Here, then, is a book that offers a new historical reconstruction of the evidence that must be taken very seriously indeed, and biblical scholars must not assume that because it is written at a more popular level it can be ignored. If I hesitate to say that I agree with every detail of the argument or hold back from saying 'there is no doubt that Colin

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has solved all the problems', that probably reflects normal scholarly caution.

What if Colin's proposals could be shown to be faulty? Would that verdict force us to doubt the historicity of the last supper? By no means! Scholarship often proceeds by producing fresh hypotheses that may turn out to be falsifiable in whole or in part but act as invitations to come up with something better. This book belongs in that category of bold, imaginative and fresh interpretations of the evidence that take us significantly forward, and I warmly commend it.

I. Howard Marshall
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University of Aberdeen

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The people I have acknowledged above may well not agree with all the contents (and some have probably been too polite to say!). I am extremely grateful to all of them for the time and effort they have spent in helping me to write this book.