





Is Passover on the First Day of Unleavened Bread?

Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
14 Nissan	15 Nissan	16 Nissan	17 Nissan
Began Tuesday @ 6pm	Began Wed. @ 6pm	Began Thurs. @ 6pm	Began Friday @ 6pm
8	9	10	11
Erev Pesach - First Seder tonight	Passover- 2nd Seder tonight	Passover Omer: Day One	Passover Omer: Day Two
Tonight Count 1	Tonight Count 1	Tonight Count 2	Tonight Count 3
			

Matthew, Mark, and Luke, together called the Synoptic Gospels because of their similarities, each contain language that appears to put Jesus and the disciples' Passover preparations and observance on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Before examining each of these accounts, it is helpful to understand the religious environment of the first century and what led up to it. In so doing, we will have taken a long step toward answering this seeming contradiction. **Isagogics, [introductory study; esp., the study of the literary history of the Bible, considered as introductory to the study of Bible interpretation] is extremely important in understanding Luke 22:7-20.**

First, the original instructions clearly stipulate that Passover is a single day—Abib 14—followed by the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread, beginning on Abib 15 (Exodus 12:6-20; Leviticus 23:5-8; Numbers 9:2-5). ***These original instructions also direct the Israelites to keep the Passover in individual homes rather than at the Tabernacle or Temple—to catch the blood of the lamb in a basin and smear it on the doorposts and lintel of the house*** (Exodus 12:22).

Over time, though, the children of Israel moved farther from God and His instructions. During the reigns of the kings, Israel and Judah, now separate nations, adopted many practices from the pagan cultures surrounding them, with the kings often leading the way. However, a few kings of Judah, such as Hezekiah and Josiah, stand out for their dedication to God. *Under these zealous monarchs, various religious reforms were instituted to try to bring Judah back to God's way. Among other reforms, they reinstated the commanded observance of the Passover, which the people were not keeping to any significant degree, if at all.*

However, these well-meaning reforms also contained a subtle change: Under both Hezekiah and Josiah—at the king's command rather than God's—the people observed the Passover *at the Temple rather than in individual homes (II Chronicles 30 and 35)*. The kings may have done this to ensure that the people actually kept the Passover *and did so without mixing in the Baalism that was so prevalent in the land*. These kings' examples introduced a second way of observing the Passover. Now the Jews had both God's original Passover instructions as well as the kings' reforms to draw on when determining how to observe the festival.

While God intended the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread to be separate (though adjacent) observances, the Jews ended up combining the two during the Babylonian exile, as the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* confirms: "***The feast of Passover consists of two parts: The Passover ceremony and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Originally, both parts existed separately; but at the beginning of the [Babylonian] exile they were combined***" (vol. 13, p. 169). *This careless and unscriptural merging of festivals resulted in the Jews observing Passover late on Abib 14, just hours before the Feast of Unleavened Bread began.* **THUS, A THIRD VARIATION OF PASSOVER OBSERVANCE WAS ADDED TO THE MIX.**

At the time of Jesus Christ, this mixture was on full display. Philo of Alexandria, in *De Vita Mosis*, notes that in the early first century, the Passover was not strictly a Temple-kept event, but one in which people also killed their own lambs without help from the priests. In his *Wars of the Jews*, Flavius Josephus records that in 4 BC over 250,000 lambs were sacrificed for Passover. However, given the limited space of the Temple environs and the fact that *Jewish tradition* (not the Word of God) held that the lambs were to be slain within a two-hour time slot (from the ninth to the eleventh hour, or 3:00-5:00 pm), it is readily apparent that not all of those lambs could have been sacrificed at the Temple. In fact, Joachim Jeremias, in *Jerusalem in the Times of Jesus*, calculates that the three courses of priests on duty could slay only 18,000 lambs during those two hours. Josephus records that the rest of the lambs—a far greater number—were slain by individuals at their own homes.

Another critical point is that, despite Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread being distinct festivals, they were commonly grouped together and simply called "Passover." Thus, when the gospel writers mention "Passover," it can sometimes refer to the Passover sacrifice itself (Matthew 26:17; Mark 14:12), the day when the sacrifice was made (Mark 14:1), or the whole eight-day period of Abib 14-21 (Passover plus Unleavened Bread; Luke 22:1).

In actuality, then, there were really TWO Passover observances happening at the time of Jesus: ONE led by the priests at the Temple and the OTHER OBSERVED BY THE PEOPLE IN THEIR HOMES [the upper room]. These separate observances were also at different times: The Temple-kept Passover was observed late in the afternoon of Abib 14, while the home-kept Passover was kept at the beginning of Abib 14. As the gospels show, Jesus and His disciples ate the Passover in a home rather than at the Temple, observing it the evening before the priests did at the Temple. In other words, Jesus kept it as Abib 14 began in a home **[as required by His Father], while the priests kept it as Abib 14 ended.**

With this background in place, it is easier to understand the seemingly contradictory language of the time-markers given in the gospels. Matthew 26:17 reads, "Now on the first day of the Feast

of the Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying to Him, 'Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?'" (italics in original). This translation introduces an impossibility due to the fact that God's instructions to Israel plainly state that Passover is the day *before* the Feast of Unleavened Bread—and we can be sure that Christ and the disciples were not late! That the disciples inquired about making preparations—and later that night assumed Judas would be purchasing something "for the feast" (**John 13:29**)—shows that the time in question could not have been the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. **Why? That day is a holy convocation on which no customary work is to be done (Leviticus 23:7)**, if God's instructions are to remain unbroken.

As we have seen, by the lifetime of Jesus Christ, the Jews had two competing ways to determine when to observe the Passover. **One of them was observed by the people in their homes in the evening as Abib 14 began** [as required by Moses], and **THE OTHER**, led by the priests at the Temple, **was kept in the late afternoon of Abib 14 just before Abid 15 began**. **In the Gospels, Jesus and His disciples are shown observing the Passover in a private home at the beginning of Abib 14, a meal that tradition calls "the Last Supper."**

However, the Gospel writers penned a few verses that seem to contradict God's instructions to Israel about keeping the Passover at that time. For instance, Matthew 26:17 reads, "*Now on the first day of the Feast of the Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying to Him, 'Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?'"* (italics in original). As we noted, this could not be the first day of Unleavened Bread because God says no customary work is to be done on it. If it were, the disciples would not use it to prepare for the Passover.

So how are we to understand this verse? **FIRST**, notice that the words "**day of the Feast of**" are italicized, showing that the translators added them to the text. The Greek literally reads, "*And on the first unleavened. . .*" The word translated as "first," *protos*, typically signifies a thing that is first in a sequence or first in prominence. However, it can also indicate an order of events, as well as whether an event occurs before or concurrently with another.

For example, in John 1:15 John the Baptist acknowledges Christ's pre-existence, saying, "**He who comes after me is preferred before [above] me, for He was [protos] me**" (see also verse 30). Matthew 26:17, then, can more accurately be translated, "Now before [the Feast of] Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying to Him, 'Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?'" In other words, this incident happened before the Feast of Unleavened Bread had begun. **Since they were inquiring about preparing the Passover, this could have taken place either late in the day on Abib 13 or possibly just after sunset on Abib 14 (since the Passover lamb was to be killed between sunset and dark as the 14th began).**

Mark 14:12 contains another time marker that seems to contradict the Passover instructions: "Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they killed the Passover lamb, His disciples said to Him, 'Where do You want us to go and prepare, that You may eat the Passover?'" As we have seen, the word *first* can also mean "before" or "the beginning." The word translated as "day," *heeméra*, can refer to a literal 24-hour period of time, but it can also indicate a general period of time or a season (see Luke 9:51; 17:24; 19:42; 23:7; John 8:56; Acts 2:20; 8:1; 17:31; Romans 2:5; I Corinthians 3:13; II Corinthians 6:2; Ephesians 6:13; Hebrews 3:8). So the first part of Mark 14:12 could also be translated,

"Now *at the beginning of the season* of Unleavened Bread . . ." or "Now *at the beginning of the time* of Unleavened Bread . . ." Nothing dictates that in this case *heeméra* designates a specific 24-hour period, and much argues against it.

We have already seen from Matthew 26:17 that the disciples asked this question before the Feast of Unleavened Bread and before they had kept the Passover. But how are we to understand the explanation, "when they killed the Passover lamb"? In the Greek, the word translated as "killed" is *éthuon*. It can indeed refer to the singular act of slaying an animal (Acts 11:7), but also to a religious sacrifice (Acts 14:13) or to the entire occasion of which a slaughtered animal was paramount, such as the fatted calf being killed for the prodigal son (Luke 15:23, 27, 30). In addition, in the sentence in question, **the verb tense indicates an action in progress but not yet completed.**

In other words, the sacrificing of the Passover lamb—or preparations for doing so—was taking place at the time the disciples asked their question! **Remember, most of the people did not observe a Temple-kept Passover; in Mark 14:12, the common people were sacrificing lambs throughout the city, not the priests.** The priests would not slay the Temple Passover lambs until the following afternoon. But as Abib 14 was drawing near, the disciples observed people around them on the outskirts of Jerusalem in the process of sacrificing—at least engaging in the necessary preparations, even if they did not perform the sacrifice itself until after sunset—prompting them to ask Jesus where He wanted them to likewise prepare for Passover.

Luke 22:7-8 contains this same occasion, but with a slightly different emphasis: "Then came the Day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover must be killed. And He sent Peter and John, saying, 'Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat.'" As we have seen, God instructs Israel to kill the Passover on Abib 14, not on the first day of Unleavened Bread, which falls on Abib 15. Yet here we have something called "the Day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover *must* be killed," and it is taking place even before the Passover!

This is easily resolved when we remember that "day" in Greek, *heeméra*, does not have to refer to a specific span of 24 hours, but may indicate a general period of time or a season. The Passover sacrifice was certainly made within the time or season of unleavened bread—not the specific feast but the food itself. **IN FACT, Abib 13—the day before Passover—was the day that the Jews disposed of all leavening, and they prepared unleavened bread for the Passover meal.**

According to the Mishna, on Abib 13 the Jews would burn the leaven by 10:00 am, and they were not allowed to eat anything leavened after 11:00 am. **The unleavened bread was baked and ready for the Passover by 3:00 pm. Abib 13 was the beginning of the time of unleavened bread,** and the Passover was sacrificed during this time, even though the Feast of Unleavened Bread did not begin until Abib 15.

THUS, Mark 14:12 and Luke 22:7 are about, not the holy day that begins the weeklong Feast, but the season of unleavened bread, which begins on Abib 13. As that day was ending, the disciples asked Jesus about their own preparations for the Passover, which would begin just after sunset, at the beginning of Abib 14. **With these alleged contradictions answered, we see that the Gospels do not support the idea that Passover falls on the first day of Unleavened Bread.**