

2017

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Darrell L. Bock

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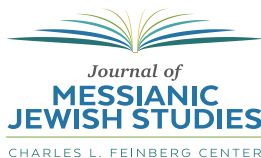
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### Recommended Citation

Bock, Darrell L. (2017) "Passover in the Gospel of Luke," *Journal of Messianic Jewish Studies*: Vol. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.biola.edu/jmjs/vol2/iss1/5>

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## Passover in the Gospel of Luke

**Darrell L. Bock**

The events of the Last Supper are critical as it is the basis for what is commonly known as the Lord's Supper or Communion. The Apostle Paul considers this meal to be important as he makes direct reference to the words spoken by Jesus at the table, which most Christians today hear regularly. (1 Cor. 11:23–25).

However, the issues related to this meal are numerous and complex, leading to a host of debates and discussions, each of which could fill this chapter.<sup>1</sup> However, our concerns are narrow.

We will attempt to answer the question, “What does the first-century Jewish background of the Passover holiday contribute to our understanding of what Jesus did with His disciples at this evidently special meal?” Specifically, we will need to establish if a Passover or Passover-like meal took place, what can be known about the way in which it was celebrated, and how Jesus transformed this celebration by His words and actions.

1 Perhaps the most complete recent discussion is by I. Howard Marshall, “The Last Supper,” in *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus: A Collaborative Exploration of Context and Coherence*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 247 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 481–588. What is amazing about this one-hundred-page article is how many issues are compressed into this discussion.



Luke explicitly associates the Last Supper with the Passover meal and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Luke 22:1, 7, 15). He does this because the two feasts come back to back and were often combined or discussed together with either name used for the whole (Ezek. 45:21; Matt. 26:17–18; Mark 14:1, esp. 14:2). Flavius Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, writes “the feast of unleavened bread, which we call the Passover” (*Antiquities of the Jews* 14.21).<sup>2</sup> The Passover connection is also seen in Mark’s use of the terms in Mark 14:1, 12, where he similarly refers to both celebrations. This is an important observation to make as we prepare to discuss the topic.

As is common within the Jewish community today, one could use “Passover” or “Unleavened Bread” in reference to any part of the eight days of this period (Lev. 23:5–6). Yet, the Synoptic Gospels’ timing for Passover seems to differ from John’s, who links the day of Jesus’s crucifixion with Passover, a connection that could make the Passover mentioned by John’s Gospel lag a day behind the Synoptic Gospels (John 13:1; 18:28; 19:14). This seeming difference in timing has been vigorously discussed in New Testament studies throughout the years and is our first topic of concern in this chapter.

Our second concern is to decide if the meal described in Luke chapter 22 is actually a traditional Passover Seder. The celebration of the Passover goes back centuries as other chapters in this book show. But the more controversial question is whether specifically a Passover Seder was celebrated or merely a liturgically structured meal with multiple cups. And if it was a Seder, where can we find more conclusive information regarding the meal, elements, symbolism, and traditions observed that evening at that particular first-century time? We will examine whether or not Jesus observed a defined Seder, the nature of its internal elements and symbols, such as the cups mentioned in the account, and if what Luke describes is generally consistent with the elements of the Passover meal. So we are asking two questions: (1) Was this a Passover meal? (2) If it was a Seder, do we know enough about the Seder at that time to suggest what took place when?

2 Similarly, see Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 2.317; 17.213; and 20.106; see also *Jewish War* 5.99, where Josephus says Unleavened Bread starts on Nisan 14, which is Passover.



The Seder question introduces the question of indiscriminately viewing the Passover in Jesus's time through the lens of Jewish tradition developed centuries later. We are referring specifically to the mishnaic tractate *Pesahim* (10), developed around 200 C.E. as the earliest rabbinic source of information about the traditions of the Seder. Certainly we must be careful not to read the modern Seder, found in the traditional Haggadah, into the events of Luke chapter 22. However, there might very well be some traditions that parallel and have persisted through time. Being conclusive will be difficult as we have very limited historical resources about the Passover Seder from the first century.

Whatever we think about these two issues—(1) the Synoptic-John chronological issue around the exact timing of Passover and (2) about the question of a specific Passover and its accompanying Seder—the association of this meal with this time period in general is full of significance. Interestingly, even those who think the meal was not a Seder or some type of Passover meal recognize the shadow cast by the Passover season over the Last Supper. The Passover's proximity to the meal colors what is said and done in chapter 22 of Luke, no matter how some of the details might be understood. Part of the beauty of this issue is that, as complex as some of the details are that we shall cover, the larger outline is still fairly clear. This is because Passover was a prescribed feast leading into a week's celebration whose symbolism was well established by the time Jesus sat down with His disciples for this event (Exod. 12:1–49).

Regardless of how this meal aligns with the mishnaic Seder or today's Passover celebrations, Jesus clearly connects it to the Passover and gives the symbolism of the evening a greater meaning. So what Jesus does with the Passover imagery will be our third stopping point and will conclude our look at the Passover in Luke 22.



## THE TIMING AND NATURE OF THE MEAL: ON OR BEFORE PASSOVER?

How do we explain the seeming discrepancies in chronology between the Synoptics and John's Gospel? The Apostle John appears to speak of the Last Supper as happening a day before the Passover lambs were slaughtered (John 13:1; 18:28; 19:14), while Mark 14:1 and 12 place the meal on the Passover. In fact, John 19:14 speaks of Jesus's trial with Pilate being on the day of preparation for the Passover, while 18:28 speaks of the Jewish leaders not entering Pilate's Praetorium for fear of becoming defiled and thus unable to eat the Passover. If John's dating is correct, Jesus's meal might not even have been a Passover meal, as the Last Supper would have been held a day before the Passover, *if* John 18:28 is referring to the Passover sacrifice and meal. It is dealing with the *if* that drives the options people suggest.

Three major options are suggested to bring the references in line. Option 1 argues that one writer is referring to the season as a whole either in terms of general timing (usually John) or in some symbolic way (either the Synoptics or John). Option 2 is an appeal to distinct calendars with Jesus on His own Passover schedule in the Synoptics distinct from the official calendar that John appeals to.<sup>3</sup> Option 3 makes an appeal to a Passover-like meal or a Passover meal taken early.<sup>4</sup>

At the center of the discussion are several contested elements. Is there evidence of a Passover meal in the descriptions? Is there a case for the use of multiple calendars? How do we explain the remarks made in John, especially 18:28, that in light of the Passover, the Jewish leaders did not want to contract uncleanness during Jesus's examination by Pilate? We will consider these elements next.

3 For example, the study by Annie Jaubert, *La date de la Cène: Calendrier biblique et liturgie chrétienne* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1957); English translation: Annie Jaubert, *The Date of the Last Supper*, trans. Isaac Rafferty [Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1965]), argues that Jesus followed the distinct calendar of the Dead Sea Qumran community. However, no evidence really exists for Jesus following this separatist sect on matters in general, much less on matters tied to the calendar.

4 For details on an array of options, see Marshall, "The Last Supper," 552–60.



Two of John's references are to the Passover in general in 13:1 and 19:14. The reference in 13:1 is generic, simply noting that before the time of the Passover feast Jesus knew His time to depart this world had come. This reference does not help us with our question. On the other end of the passage sequence stands John 19:14, which says, "It was the day of the preparation for the Passover" as Pilate presents Jesus to the crowd after examining Him. This is after the Last Supper in the Synoptics and the Upper Room discourse in John. One of the issues here is that John does not present a discussion of the meal and its liturgy at all. This does not mean that John does not hold to a Last Supper meal because by the time he wrote, this practice had been formalized into the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 11:23–26, plus the traditions that fed into the Synoptic portrayals). John simply chose not to present it, probably because it was an already well-known event in the Church.

The phrase in John 19:14 could mean one of two things: the day of preparation for the Passover meal itself, placing it in tension with the Synoptic timing, or it is shorthand for the day of Sabbath preparation during Passover week, as the Sabbath begins with sundown on Friday night leading into Saturday. The additional reference to the Passover points to a sacrifice during the time of Passover and could refer to other sacrifices tied to that feast, either daily sacrifices (Deut. 16:2–8)<sup>5</sup> or the *hagigah* (Num. 28:18–19). The Synoptics show this latter meaning of preparation day for the Sabbath in other texts (Matt. 27:62; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54).<sup>6</sup> Part of what is complicating the discussion of this event is that the Sabbath of a feast week is a High Sabbath, a kind of twofer holiday, doubly sacred because it is a Sabbath tied to a feast.

This last reference is the most crucial for our discussion. I cite the controversial part of John 18:28, "They did not go into the governor's residence so they would not be ceremonially de-

5 Mishnah, Pesahim 5.1 alludes to the timing of the sacrifice on Passover day, but points to the fact that other sacrifices were taking place throughout this period. This passage alludes to the sacrifices tied to the daily times of prayer.

6 Leon Morris, who will argue in contrast to the view taken in this chapter for John's Passover chronology, also accepts that the reference here in John 19:14 is to the Friday before the Sabbath ("the Friday of Passover week") versus a Passover reference; *The Gospel according to John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 800.



filed, but could eat the Passover meal” (NET). The avoidance behavior in this verse takes place as the examination of Jesus by Pilate begins. The leaders do not want to contract uncleanness by going into a Gentile’s residence. Most take this location to be the tower of Antonia, the fortress where Pilate stayed when he was in Jerusalem that also housed the troops protecting the city. This location overlooked the Temple complex from the northwest corner of the Temple mount in such a way that the troops could see Temple activity without defiling the Temple space proper. Only closed spaces like these were thought to create an environment where one could contract uncleanness, as colonnades were in the open air and viewed as not having the same level of risk (m. Ohalot 18:7–10). Uncleanness in such a case lasts for a week, because of the belief that Gentiles did not take proper care of the dead (Num. 19:14). Issues tied to uncleanness were important because contamination would preclude these priests from observing any part of the feast.<sup>7</sup> Other forms of uncleanness lasting for a day could be related to the presence of yeast (m. Pesahim 1.1; 2.1) or to contaminated road dust from foreigners (m. Berakhot 9.5). They wanted to avoid these possibilities in any form and so they remained outside. Pilate kindly came out to address them.

For our purposes it is the seeming reference to eating the Passover meal in John 18:28 that contains the difficulty. If this is the Passover meal, then John and the Synoptics are not in sync, since Luke 22:15 presents Jesus as eating the Passover with the disciples (also Mark 14:12). New Testament and Johannine scholar Dr. Leon Morris defends John’s chronology, and his explanation is worth noting. He first cites an observation: “That the expression could apply to the Passover plus the feast of unleavened bread is, in my opinion, clear.”<sup>8</sup> He then goes on to say, “That it could be used of the feast of unleavened bread without the Passover, which is what is required if John 18:28 is to be squared with the theory, is not.”<sup>9</sup> So, for Morris, John must be referring to the Passover meal. Passover has to be in the

7 Morris, *John*, 763.

8 Morris, *John*, 689.

9 Morris, *John*, 689.



reference for him. If Morris is correct, then what do we do with the references in Mark and Luke? Morris opts for Jesus's use of a different, more sectarian calendar to solve the seeming contradiction. Above, it was suggested that the evidence for the use of a different calendar is not strong.

But what are we to do if the reference is to the High Sabbath Passover *season* sacrifices? Morris never mentions this possibility, yet the chronology permits it with an expression already shown to be ambiguous. Passover is not excluded here, and can be referred to because the holiday colors the whole week. The sentence is not merely specific to the Passover sacrifice at the beginning of the feast, but refers to any of the events tied to the opening of the celebration. Morris is seeing a technical term that involves a reference to a specific meal that in fact may have been used more broadly in terms of other events tied to the week.

However, the reference to the Passover can be used of a period of time, covering the entire week, with more than one meal eaten during that entire season, any part of which could be called Passover. The term in such contexts is being used in a popular, less technical way, a kind of shorthand to point to what kicked off this special time and an event that worked as kind of a shadow over the whole week.

All of these options would require cleanliness during this time, especially as people approached a Sabbath.<sup>10</sup> The internal chronology within John itself also may suggest this broader use of the phrase and a timing like that of the Synoptics. If, while noting the array of events, we simply count back from Nisan 14 to the six days “before the Passover” that John 12:1 mentions, then Nisan 14 *is* the day of Passover (Thursday night/Friday day) *within* John's Gospel just as the Synoptics present it.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> John 19:31 might seem to raise questions about our claim about ambiguity, as it refers clearly to the day of preparation and does not call it Passover. But we are still in the Passover day at this point of the story, and now the issue is getting the body off the cross before the Sabbath actually comes. The aside in the verse that this Sabbath was a “great one” is the allusion to the Passover High Sabbath. It was the Passover season that made this Sabbath an even more special day than a normal Sabbath. Passover is still indirectly in view even in 19:31. John may be only using a shortened form here.

<sup>11</sup> One has to work back one event at a time to the events of John 12 using both the Synoptics and John's hints about dating and timing of events to get here, but it does work. The details on this argument are found in the companion chapter in this





What makes the chronology work in this way in John is that we also are dealing with a late-day meal in John 12,<sup>12</sup> which by the counting and description looks to be an evening meal held on Friday night, Nisan 8, rather than a late afternoon meal.

So we are contending that the Synoptics and John are in agreement and the confusion comes from failing to see (1) that the reference to Passover is to the entire eight days referred to as the Feast of Passover / Unleavened Bread and (2) that reference to eating Passover meals could refer to the Passover meal at the start of this period, but also to the sacrifices that are offered on the next sacred day—especially the Festival (*hagigah*) sacrifices.

If this is correct, then all the other discussions about different calendars or other kinds of meals kept in the shadows of the Passover are no longer necessary. This means we can now consider the issue of the Seder used in relationship to the meal.

volume, chapter 5, “Passover in the Gospel of John,” by Mitch Glaser. Complexity exists, and being dogmatic is not permitted. Even Morris says that the alternative I am contending for and that he rejects “cannot be ruled out as impossible” (*John*, 779). Morris in adopting the chronology of John that argues for Jesus observing the Passover on a different calendar, something that Qumran shows is possible (Morris, *John*, 779–85). This explanation is also conceivable, but I see it as less likely (see n. 3 above). Other explanations tied to a simple association with the Passover time also could work by arguing that the Synoptics have painted a meal with the symbol of the season and Jesus turning a meal into a Passover-like event. This approach rests on an excessive skepticism about our sources and understates the chronological links we have pointed out.

12 There is another issue wrapped up in this discussion, as the evening meal in John 12 where an anointing occurs is placed next to a note that we are six days before the Passover in John. Virtually all agree that the anointing in John is the same as the one in Mark 14 that is placed in a context where both Mark 14 and Matthew 26 have just mentioned that we are two days from the Passover. However this chronological note has to do more directly with the plotting by the leaders (Mark 14:1; Matt. 26:2), not the meal as described in Mark 14:3–9 and Matthew 26:6–13. So John’s six-day note on the timing may well be correct. The meal in the Synoptics is simply introduced in Mark 14:3 and Matthew 26:6 with a note about it being held while Jesus was in Bethany. If originally these events of plotting and the anointing meal circulated independently in the tradition, then this beginning for the meal does not give a specific date and time to the event and John’s timing is likely more precise. The Synoptics prefer a more topical arrangement where the anointing woman senses Jesus’s peril given the leaders’ desire to be done with Jesus. The plot has been juxtaposed to an earlier meal.



## THE SEDER AND THE LAST SUPPER

Although the Synoptics seem to be clear that this is a Passover meal (Mark 14:12 and Luke 22:15), we might examine some other indications that this is true. We have a meal in Jerusalem (all Gospels), at night (Matt. 26:20; Mark 14:17; Luke 22:7 with 22:14; John 13:2; all Gospels), a reclining meal that points to a special occasion (John 13:12), singing hymns pointing to the *Hallel* psalms (Pss. 113–118) of the meal (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26), the presence of interpretation of the elements of the bread and wine (Synoptics), and remarks tied to giving to the poor (Matt. 26:9; John 13:29) since the giving of alms were a part of the Passover season.

When one discusses the Seder, the source of recorded tradition is found in the Mishnah (m. Pesahim 10), compiled around 200 c.e. This mishnaic tractate suggests that the Seder uses four cups of wine during the meal. The order of the cups is as follows: a blessing with the first cup of wine; the recitation between the father and the son reviewing the events of Exodus with the second cup of wine; the consumption of the food with the third cup of wine; and the singing of the *Hallel* psalms with the fourth cup of wine. Scholars have associated Jesus's remarks in various ways, tying them to the second, third and fourth cups. The third cup is the more common association.<sup>13</sup>

However, as we mentioned earlier, it is hard to determine if this tradition dates back to the time of Jesus. That the Seder we have in the Mishnah goes back to Jesus's time is less than certain because we do not have any references or sources contemporary to Jesus or predating him that give any details about any Seder.<sup>14</sup> Some lines in Pesahim 10 clearly have a post-destruction of the Temple perspective showing them to come after Jesus's time as

13 Marshall, "The Last Supper," notes that the third cup is the most common view (544 n225). Dissent on this comes from Rabbi D. M. Cohn-Sherbok, "A Jewish Note on τὸ ποτήριον τῆς εὐλογίας," *New Testament Studies* 27, no. 5 (1981): 704–9, who argues for the fourth cup, while Phillip Segal, "Another Note to 1 Corinthians 10:16," *New Testament Studies* 29, no. 1 (1983): 134–39, considers Cohn-Sherbok's arguments and opts for the second cup.

14 I have in mind here the writer of the OT pseudepigraphal book of Jubilees, Josephus, or Philo, who simply do not address the topic.



it refers back to “in the time of the Temple.” They speak about what took place in the Temple before the Temple’s destruction, given that the end of Pesahim 10.3 talks about the pre-destruction practice in terms of the sacrifice, not merely the uttering of the Seder.<sup>15</sup> In fact, the Seder’s language itself has no direct reference to a sacrifice, which those who regard the Seder as a post-Temple (after 70 C.E.) liturgical construction take as more evidence of it being a later development. Nevertheless, the three essentials of the meal according to Pesahim 10.5 are (1) to discuss the Passover event of God passing over the houses as he judged (Exod. 12), (2) the symbolism of the unleavened bread (picturing redemption; Exod. 13:7–9; Deut. 16:3), and (3) the symbolism of the bitter herbs (picturing the bitter life in Egypt; Exod. 12:8; Num. 9:11). As the listing above shows, all of these symbols are explicit in the Torah. These elements seem to be included in the Seder mentioned in Luke chapter 22.

Adding to this uncertainty about the level of developed Jewish Passover tradition present at the Last Supper is that Matthew and Mark only refer to one cup and one taking of bread, while Luke alone mentions two cups. The Seder itself has four cups. So it becomes very hard to be conclusive about what exactly took place and in what order. The variety of views tied to which of the four cups in particular is present at the Last Supper shows the difficulty here (see note 13 above).

The New Testament does not focus on the details of the ancient Seder nor the traditions associated with the event, but rather on the association between the Passover and the deliverance of the nation from Egyptian slavery. In Exodus 12:27 the gathered family is told, “It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, for He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and spared our homes” (HCSB).

This first-century scene involving Jesus certainly included a meal with elements recalling the Exodus and reflected whatever liturgy was in place at the time, even if we do not know all the details. The Exodus is clearly the background for the Passover

15 Baruch M. Bokser, “Was the Last Supper a Passover Seder?” *Bible Review* 3, no. 2 (1987): 24–33, argues that the Seder we have in the Mishnah is post destruction of the Temple.



meal. It appears very likely to have been a Passover meal, but exactly what kind of Seder attached to it, along with how the individual elements were viewed, is not as clear.

This brings us to our third topic, Jesus's recasting of this meal and its longstanding significance.

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS RECASTING THE MEAL

One of the unique features of the Lucan portrayal of the Last Supper is the potential mention of multiple cups, an issue tied to a famous problem about the exact wording of the original Lucan text. That question is whether Luke 22:19b–20 is an original part of Luke's Gospel.<sup>16</sup> The longer version of the text picks up from the mention of "this is My body," shared with the other Synoptics, and adds to it, 'being given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And the cup likewise after dinner, saying, 'This cup is the New Covenant in my blood, being shed for you'" (author's translation). Thus the longer version does several things: (1) it makes the point about a substitutionary sacrifice for both the bread and the cup ("for you"), (2) it calls for a repetition of the observance ("Do this in remembrance of me"), (3) it makes for the use of multiple cups unique to Luke, and (4) it explicitly ties Jesus's act to the New Covenant ("new covenant in My blood").

The major reason to accept the longer reading is that its manuscript evidence is extensively distributed across key early witnesses and most textual families.<sup>17</sup> Another feature is that

16 The problem is covered in detail by Marshall, "The Last Supper," 529–41. He works through several internal arguments. I will only focus on the external evidence in this chapter.

17 This includes strong Alexandrian and Byzantine support, a rare but important alliance. Here we have  $\aleph^5$ , A, B, as well as E, G, H, and N. The only family presenting the shorter text involve the Western texts. The only Greek witness to the shorter text is the sometimes idiosyncratic D, a manuscript that often goes its own way in giving readings of the Greek. Textual families are manuscripts that belong together because they show the same shared readings in many places.



there are next to no variants for the longer reading, while the shorter version appears in various forms. Multiple variants are often an indication of later changes, that is, the introduction of a variety of attempts to fix the text. It also would be odd for the scribes to make an addition that goes in a direction away from the mention of a single cup shared with Matthew's and Mark's versions. So multiple cups looks original because of its uniqueness, since a scribe would tend to bring texts into agreement and so act to remove the differing number of cups. It also would be odd to have an original version with no words said over the cup that relate to Jesus's death. If the longer text is original, as we are arguing, then the multiple cups are part of what points to a special Passover meal.

What makes this meal so different is that Jesus not only refers to the Exodus and ties the meal to Israel's history, but also completely recasts the meal as a vehicle for describing His coming death as a substitutionary sacrifice. The Lucan reference "for you" points to the substitutionary nature of the sacrifice. In Mark 14:24 Jesus speaks of his shed blood given "for many," an allusion to Mark 10:45, presenting the idea that Jesus will die as a "ransom for many." This is in fact a very likely Messianic allusion to Isaiah 53:12, where the Servant bears the sin of the many.<sup>18</sup>

In the Lucan version, the bread is His body and the wine pictures His blood shed for His disciples. Whether Jesus spoke of "the many" as in Mark 14:24 or of the sacrifice being "for you" as in Luke 22:19–20, the point is crystal clear, as Jesus is about to die as an offering made on behalf of others.<sup>19</sup> The allu-

18 On Mark's meaning, see Darrell Bock, *Mark*. New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 342–43. Paul also refers to this meal as a part of Early Church tradition in 1 Corinthians 11:23–26. Paul's version mirrors that of Luke on the issue of the death being "for you." Matthew 26:26–28 is the other Synoptic account of this meal. Matthew's version is similar to Mark's with the death being "for many."

19 Such variations in wording at the same point of an event are not uncommon in the Gospels, but they are not a problem, since a writer can choose to quote or give the force of what is meant. So such differences may simply make explicit what was implicit. The core point in both versions is the same. In speaking of Jesus's act for the many, Mark surely was including His death for the disciples, just as the disciples are but a portion of those Jesus intended to die for on the cross. On this phenomenon in the Gospel accounts, see Darrell L. Bock, "Precision and Accuracy: Making Distinctions



sion to establishing a covenant (Mark 14:24) or a new covenant (Luke 22:20) also assumes a sacrifice and the shedding of blood (Heb. 9:15–22) to inaugurate a covenant.<sup>20</sup>

So in both versions the meal is portrayed as a commentary on Jesus's forthcoming work, which is the ultimate act of deliverance the Passover anticipated. What started as Israel's deliverance, God also had in mind the ultimate blessing for the world (Gen. 12:1–3). In places within the meal and service where you would naturally expect to hear about the deliverance of Israel through the first Exodus, we see Jesus pointing His disciples to His substitutionary death for sinners—a second and even greater Exodus deliverance.

Now an important question arises: Who has the right to transform the meaning of a Feast prescribed by the Torah? The Passover liturgy became part of Israel's historical narrative and had been developing continually since the Exodus as previous chapters in this book have shown.<sup>21</sup> The focus of course in those developments was always the Exodus from Egypt. Yet Jesus takes matters for His disciples further than expected by such customs. He does not simply look back on the original deliverance from Egypt, but rather takes center stage Himself and turns the gaze of His disciples to a new and greater act of deliverance. In this He claims rightful authority over the sacred calendar, not by subtraction but by addition. Jesus also adds to the symbolism of the celebration of Passover and by doing so claims authority over Jewish tradition, similar to His claiming to be Lord of the Sabbath (Luke 6:1–5). Jesus declares Himself to be the full realization of the Passover. He contends that the symbols of the meal have their fulfillment in His sacred work.

This is a significant Christological and soteriological claim. It

in the Cultural Context That Give Us Pause in Pitting the Gospels Against One Another," in *Do Historical Matters Matter to the Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier, Dennis Magary (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 367–82.

<sup>20</sup> Again, the difference here is not significant. The only covenant left to establish when Jesus spoke was the eschatologically hoped for New Covenant. Luke makes explicit what Mark says implicitly.

<sup>21</sup> To develop liturgy around the same event is common in Israelite worship. This book is showing as much about the Passover imagery. However, the extension of liturgy is not what we have here with Jesus. We have fresh symbolism built around a distinct event.



also is an assertion about His role to Israel and the world involving the hope of eschatology. Jesus is about to fulfill hidden hopes residing in the hearts of His chosen people for ages. Jesus's death would bring a greater salvation than the Exodus and initiate the New Covenant predicted by Jeremiah the prophet (Jer. 31:31–34).

The Messiah's fresh approach to the symbolism of the Seder is also a claim to greater authority over divine acts and deliverance. The disciples sat down to this meal expecting to again look back on what God did, but were now urged to see their Master in a new light as the Sacrificial Lamb, the penultimate peak of God's program having revelatory authority over the divine calendar and Jewish tradition.<sup>22</sup> In this Jesus claimed far more authority than any rabbi before or after Him.

Passover transformed becomes a statement about God's ultimate act of deliverance. Jesus's coming death and resurrection reflects God's vindication of the claims made at His final meal. Jesus reveals His right to create revelation, as God Himself did when He inaugurated the Feast in Exodus 12. The Last Supper becomes a commentary on what God was doing in and through the work of the Messiah. The Last Supper is a commentary rooted in the history of Israel presenting Jesus as the Savior. He uniquely stands at the very nexus of God's plan for saving a broken world.

## CONCLUSION

The question of Luke's portrayal of the Last Supper as a Passover meal is both complex and subject to a variety of difficult questions. We only touched on some critical concerns enabling us to better understand the significance of Jesus's statements in these final moments with His disciples. We believe it was a Passover meal and that the significance of the event is often underappreciated, regardless of how one views the degree to which His Seder meal reflected the later written traditions found in the Mishnah.

<sup>22</sup> We say "penultimate" because after the death comes resurrection, which is the guarantee of everything claimed about the death.



We may now ask ourselves, “What does it mean if some of these historical judgments about the Last Supper, its details, or its specific chronology, are wrong?” Ironically, it means little. Many scholars who do not see a Passover meal here still view the Passover as relevant to understanding the backdrop for Jesus’s activities at the event.<sup>23</sup> The actions would perhaps not have the same intensity as if a more traditional understanding of a Passover meal was accepted, but His choice to add fresh symbolism, connected to the Passover, should still be viewed as a bold innovation.

All that has been said would apply regardless. Jesus was giving the Passover season deeper significance. A new deliverance, a fresh Exodus, had come. However, if what we have argued is the case, and we are witnessing a Passover meal of some sort, then Jesus’s act may be viewed as doubly provocative. His pointing to a new and greater salvation as well as new revelatory authority over salvation and the Feast will only add to the majesty of His person.

All of this means that when we celebrate the Passover with Jesus in mind we are considering two events: (1) one linked to Israel and God’s deliverance of the Jewish people from Egypt to begin the journey to the Promised Land and (2) the act of God forgiving our sin and vindicating Jesus through His resurrection and ascension, thereby distributing gifts of salvation to those who trust in His divine work (Acts 2:16–39). Of course, we also can recall that in doing this God fulfilled promises made to Israel that also were about how the people of Israel were a source of blessing for the world through their Messiah. The two events (Exodus and Cross) are powerful bookends. They represent the foreshadowing and the fulfillment. God validates Jesus’s once-for-all atoning sacrifice through His resurrection and ascension. In doing so, He shows the ultimate point of the original Exodus for the world.

Passover calls upon God’s people to look back. This is a blessing

23 A good example of such an approach is Jonathan Klawans, “Was Jesus’s Last Supper a Passover?” *Bible Review* 47, 33–24 (2001) 17, <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/jesus-historical-jesus/was-jesus-last-supper-a-seder/>, who argues against the meal being a Passover meal and yet the proximity of the meal to Passover would not be dismissed as a mere historical coincidence.





and spiritually enriching for the Jewish community. But when Jesus's followers better understand the Passover, then we are able to affirm our connection to all that Jesus proclaimed at this meal. He is with us as we celebrate the Feast. Whether we recall this during a Passover Seder or at the Lord's Table, we proclaim the Lord's death until He returns and completes what He started at this meal with His disciples (1 Cor. 11:26). To participate in this celebration is to engage in a covenant affirmation. He has initiated the New Covenant with all of its benefits, because He is Lord of the Passover, the Lamb of God, and the One to whom Passover pointed all along.