

## Roman Days, Jewish Nights, and the Gospel Calendar Problem

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*At the time of Jesus, there was no such Jewish term as “day of Preparation” in Jewish usage. Strangely, virtually the only time that term appears in any literature from that era, it is, for all practical purposes, only from texts written by the four gospel authors, or, perhaps, from someone quoting the gospel sources. But it is not independently attested outside of the gospel sources, a good indication that this was not actually a Jewish term.*

At the time of Jesus, the Roman calendar day began at about sunrise, and in the Jewish calendar the day began at about sunset. That means that every Jewish calendar day overlapped two different Roman calendar days and every Roman calendar day overlapped two different Jewish calendar days. In this essay I would like to draw attention to some chronological problems in the gospel accounts caused by the authors using the Roman calendaring system to date events in Jerusalem that unfolded according to a Jewish calendaring system.

The most obvious example of such a problem occurs when Mary Magdalene rushes to the tomb of Jesus immediately after the Sabbath ends. The context indicates that she couldn't go to the tomb until the Sabbath ended and she wanted to get there as quickly after the end of Sabbath as she could. All four gospels show her heading to the tomb of Jesus immediately after Sabbath, but they all place the event at about sunrise.<sup>1</sup> But the Jewish Sabbath ran from sunset to sunset.

So, when Mary arrived at the tomb at sunrise, either the Sabbath had not yet ended, having half a day still to go and she was in violation of the Sabbath, or the Sabbath wouldn't have started until the following sunset, a half a day later, meaning that she arrived a day and a half before for the end of the Sabbath. Since she would have been operating on a Jerusalem calendar timetable, did she arrive at the tomb during the Sabbath, before the Sabbath, or after the Sabbath? Under the Jewish calendar that would have been followed, the gospels leave the issue unresolved.

This has some implications as to whether Jesus died on the Jewish day before Sabbath, as suggested by the gospels, or more than a full Jewish day before the Sabbath, making it less necessary to remove him from the cross so he can be buried before the start of the Sabbath. This problem arises because the gospels used a Roman calendar day to define when Sabbath began and ended. The gospels placed the start of Sabbath at the next sunrise instead of the upcoming sunset. Therefore, under the Roman calendar system, Jesus need to be buried before the next sunrise. But if Jesus died on the day before Sabbath and had to be taken down from the cross to be buried before Sabbath arrived, then he needed to be buried before the coming sunset. We'll look at further problems with the Sabbath dating below.

A second example of conflict between the Roman and Jewish dating system occurs with calendaring the holidays of Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread. In the Jewish calendar system, Passover, the holiday on which the priests slaughter the lamb, fell on the Fourteenth of Nissan, and the slaughter takes place near the end of that day, just before sunset.<sup>2</sup> The Festival of Unleavened Bread began on the Fifteenth of Nissan, beginning on the evening immediately after the slaughter of the lamb.<sup>3</sup> On that first evening, the meat of the slaughtered lamb, which Jews referred to as “the Passover,” is eaten during the evening meal.

Mark, however, wrote, “On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed,”<sup>4</sup> indicating Passover and the first day of Unleavened Bread occurred on the same day. Luke, following Mark, said, “Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed.”<sup>5</sup> Technically, both are wrong. Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread are two separate holidays falling on different days in the Jewish calendar. In Mark's and Luke's defense, though, it should be noted that the sacrifice of the lamb, occurs on the first half of a Roman Day and the Passover meal is eaten on the second half of a Roman day. So, the ceremonial parts of the two Jewish days take place on the same Roman day, but the holidays take place on two different Jewish days.

Matthew, possibly aware of this problem, omits Mark's conflation of Passover and Unleavened Bread, saying only that this incident described in Mark occurred on the first day of Unleavened Bread, omitting the reference to Passover.<sup>6</sup> John takes a different tack. He placed the death of Jesus on Passover, and never refers to the Festival of Unleavened Bread.<sup>7</sup>

Let me now introduce some further problems. All four gospels agree that Jesus died on the "day of Preparation," although John disagrees with Mark as to what the day of Preparation was for.<sup>8</sup> As we shall see below, there is also a question about when "the day of Preparation" would have fallen.

According to Mark, "When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, . . ."<sup>9</sup> According to Mark, some portion of the day of Preparation occurred in the evening hours following the death of Jesus. As noted above, under some of the Sabbath scenarios, Mark may have unintentionally placed this event during the Sabbath rather than before it. In the Jewish calendar, those evening hours would be the first half of the day of Preparation and Sabbath wouldn't begin for almost another 24 hours. Under the Roman calendar, these evening hours would fall during the second half of the day of Preparation and Sabbath would begin at the coming sunrise.

On the other hand, John says, "Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon."<sup>10</sup> John, as is well known, disagrees with the synoptic gospels as to whether Jesus died before the Passover meal or after the Passover meal. I don't plan to resolve or discuss that issue in particular herein. But do note that John disagrees with Mark about what the Day of Preparation represented and when it may have fallen with respect to the Jewish calendar. John's daylight hours would fall on a different Jewish calendar day than Mark's evening hours. On the Roman calendar, however, John's daylight day of Preparation and Mark's evening day of Preparation fall on the same Roman calendar day.

Luke is somewhat ambiguous in his description of the same scene. He says, "It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning."<sup>11</sup> But he doesn't tell us whether it was day or night vis-à-vis the day of Preparation. Matthew says the scene in question occurred in the evening but doesn't say anything about this being the day of Preparation.<sup>12</sup> However, in a somewhat convoluted fashion, Matthew's only reference to the day of Preparation oddly occurs on the following day, which, he says was "The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation"<sup>13</sup> but, like Luke, makes no reference to day or night hours in his description of the day of Preparation.

The gospel references to a "day of Preparation" bring up another issue. What actually is the day of Preparation and when did it occur? As I mentioned above Mark and John have different definitions but that is not my present concern. Rather, at the time of Jesus, there was no such Jewish term as "day of Preparation" in Jewish usage. Strangely, virtually the only time that term appears in any literature from that era, it is, for all practical purposes, only from texts written by the four gospel authors, or, perhaps, from someone quoting the gospel sources. But it is not independently attested outside of the gospel sources, a good indication that this was not actually a Jewish term.

One common attempt to resolve this problem notes the existence of the idiomatic Jewish phrase "evening of [holiday feature]" and identifies the day of Preparation as a variation of that idiom. That solution raises even more problems. Let's take a closer look at the Jewish usage.

In the Jewish tradition, then and now, Jews occasionally identified the day before a holiday as "Evening of {holiday feature}." For example, the day before the Sabbath is known as "Evening of Sabbath." When you say *today* is "Evening of Sabbath," what you are actually saying is that Sabbath starts next day on the upcoming evening. "Evening of Sabbath" is not a Sabbath day; it is the day before Sabbath. In the Roman calendar, however, the latter part of Evening of Sabbath" and the early part of Sabbath fall on the same Roman calendar day, which could lead to confusingly identifying "Evening of Sabbath" with "Sabbath."

Even more confusing, in the Jewish tradition, then and now, the Passover holiday (falling on the Fourteenth of Nissan) was not referred to as "Passover" but as "Evening of Passover." In this usage, "Passover" refers not to the holiday on which the lamb is sacrificed but to the meat from the sacrificial lamb, which Jews called "the Passover." "The Passover" is eaten on the first day of Unleavened Bread (Fifteenth of Nissan.) When a Jew says "today is *Evening of Passover*" he is referring not to the actual Passover holiday, which that day is, but to the holiday beginning that evening when "the Passover" sacrifice is eaten at the Passover meal.

If the usage “day of Preparation” is meant as a replacement for the idiomatic Jewish expression “Evening of,” substituting a Roman calendar perspective on a Jewish calendar idiom, then we must address a new problem. If we follow the Jewish pattern, then the term “day of Preparation” is not the day on which “Preparation” occurs. It is the day before “Preparation” occurs. If that is the case, there are chronological consequences.

All four gospels say the day of Preparation falls on the day before the Sabbath. In the synoptic gospels, the Preparation is supposed to be for the Sabbath. But, following the idiomatic outline, that can’t be true. The day of Preparation would be the day before the day in which Sabbath preparations are made, i. e., two days before Sabbath. This upends the chronology of the tomb sequence. There would be no reason for the women not to be at the tomb and almost immediately keep watch after Jesus is buried, as Sabbath would not be for another two days. This would also raise a question as to how many full or partial days elapsed before the resurrection. Was it three, or some other number.

John, on the other hand, says that the day of Preparation referred to the day on which the lamb was prepared for slaughter. Again, following the idiomatic outline, day of Preparation would be the day before the lamb is prepared for slaughter. So, if that’s the case, Jesus wasn’t killed as a symbolic sacrifice of the Pascal lamb because the lamb wouldn’t be slaughtered until the next day.

It is not my intention here to propose any specific solution to any of these many chronological problems. Good arguments for and against several points of view can be made. I just want to show that the chronology of Jesus’ death and resurrection is a lot more complicated and potentially more troubling than we have been given to believe.

*(Gary Greenberg’s most recent book is Proving Jesus’ Authority in Mark and John: Overlooked evidence of a synoptic relationship (Cambridge Scholars Publishers, 2018.) He maintains a blog on biblical matters at biblemythhistory.com.)*

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 16:1-2; Matthew 28:1; Luke 24:1; John 20:1.

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 12:6.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 12:8.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 14:12.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 22:7.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 26:17.

<sup>7</sup> John 18:28.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 15:42; John 19:14.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 15:42.

<sup>10</sup> John 19:14.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 23:54.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 27:57.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 27:62.