

Holy Week as Recorded in the Gospels
Session #3: Plot, Last Supper, Gethsemane, and Arrest

The Plot (Mt 26:1-5; Mk 14:1-2; Lk 22:1-2; Jn 11:47-53)

John places the plot and Bethany anointing before Palm Sunday. In Matthew, Jesus predicts his death for the sixth time. The chief priests and elders meet at the palace of the High Priest, Caiaphas, and plot to kill Jesus, because “it is better for you to have one man die for the people instead of having the whole nation destroyed” (Jn 11:50). In the synoptics we learn that they planned to wait until after the festival of Passover for fear of the crowds. The authorities also wanted to (re)kill Lazarus because his resuscitation was living proof of Jesus’s power (Jn 12:9-11).

Bethany Anointing (Mt 26:6-13; Mk 14:3-9; Jn 12:1-8; - compare similar story Lk 12:1-8)

According to John, the woman with the ointment was Mary, the sister of Martha. Lazarus, their brothers, had recently been raised from the dead by Jesus. Matthew and Mark also set this scene at Bethany, but at “the house of Simon the leper.” The woman is unnamed. Luke includes a similar story at an earlier point of Jesus’ ministry, set at the house of a Pharisee Jesus calls “Simon.” Luke’s version leads Jesus into telling a parable about how sinners are more grateful for forgiveness than the righteous. According to John, Mary pours expensive ointment on Jesus’ feet and wipes them with her hair. “Judas,” “the disciples,” or “some” complained that the ointment should have been sold and the money given to the poor. But Jesus says she has done a beautiful thing, preparing him for his burial.

The Betrayal (Mt 26:14-16; Mk 14:10-11; Lk 22:3-6)

Judas was perhaps a zealot who felt betrayed by his “messiah” now talking about his death. Disillusioned, Judas betrays Jesus for 30 pieces of silver (Mt 26:15; Ex. 21:12-16; Zech 11:12). Alternatively, it may be that Judas had great confidence in Jesus, and wanted to force Jesus’ hand (so Jesus would call in the angel armies to fight the Romans. We will never know.

Preparation for the Passover (Mt 26:17-19; Mk 14:12-16; Lk 22:7-13)

(See the handout of the layout of Jerusalem.) The exact site of the Last Supper is not known. There is a building with an upstairs room that tourists can view that is “the Upper Room.” That building is not actually old enough to be the actual site. The actual location may be nearby, however – an area that during the Byzantine era was covered by a Church called “Mother of Zion.” The church seemed to incorporate a synagogue which served as a place of worship for Judeo-Christians in the first and second centuries. Years after the church had been destroyed, the synagogue portion of the church was honored as the Tomb of David. In the Crusader period, restorations made the upper floor into a small chapel for remembering both the Last Supper and the upper room of Pentecost (this is the site you can visit today). There are also clues in the texts that suggest that the Last Supper may have been held in the Essene sector of Jerusalem near the Essene Gate (we will say more about this in a moment).

It seems that Jesus had made previous arrangements concerning the Passover meal, and then sent Peter and John to Jerusalem to carry out the plans. Perhaps he kept the location a secret to avoid the crowds or allude the authorities (look at text.)

The Last Supper (Mt 26:20-28; Mk 14:17-25; Lk 22:15-38; Jn 13:1-20)

Traditionally, the Last Supper is identified as a Passover Seder, the meal Jews observe annually in remembrance of their deliverance from Egyptian bondage. The meal was filled with ritual and symbolism, and contained roast lamb, unleavened bread, wine and herbs. On this night, Jesus brought new meaning to the meal.

However, some New Testament scholars question whether the Last Supper was in fact a Passover meal. In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus tells Peter and John to “make ready the Passover.” There are problems, however, with the supper being a Passover meal from the Jewish point of view. Passover is a family night, and no family members are mentioned to be present. More importantly, how is it that the chief priests and some Sanhedrin members can be free to arrange Jesus’ arrest and have a night inquiry after his arrest? The traditional chronology of these event, which places the Last Supper on

Thursday night with Jesus' trials Friday morning, present a further problem because, according to Jewish Law, one cannot be tried on the same day as the arrest – nor can one be tried on the eve of a feast or festival. Both would be the case if the Last Supper and Passover fell on Thursday night.

The Gospel of John, on the other hand, never specifically calls the Last Supper a Passover meal. It does, however, state that the meal was eaten reclining. This does point to the Passover meal as the rabbis of Jesus' day taught that all Jews – no matter how poor – had to eat the Passover reclining. This was because the rich ate reclining while the poor often ate standing (as they did on the first Passover). A reclining meal pointed to their redemption from slavery in Egypt. But John's meal during the Passover season seems to be before the actual night of Passover.

John seems to agree with the tradition of the Jewish rabbis writing in the first century after the New Testament that the year Jesus died, Passover fell on Friday night – the eve of the Sabbath (Jn 1:26,36). According to Temple procedures, the Passover lambs were to be slaughtered between 3:00 p.m. and sunset. John reminds his readers that Jesus died at 3:00 p.m. – the same time the sacrifices were begin slaughtered (Jn 19:31,42).

When Matthew and Mark speak of the Roman soldier lifting the sponge up to Jesus' mouth, they say it was put on a reed. Only John says it was a "hyssop" reed. John is reminding his readers of Passover because in Exodus 12:22, the Israelites were told to put the blood of the lamb on their doorpost with hyssop branches.

Finally, John indicate Jesus died on the eve of Passover by specifically saying the bodies were removed early from the crosses "for the day of that Sabbath was a high day" (Jn 19:31). It seems the Sanhedrin members who referred Jesus to Pilate have not yet eaten Passover on Friday morning. While they brought him to Pilate, "they themselves did not enter into the palace so that they would not be defiled and would not be able to eat the Passover" (Jn 18:28).

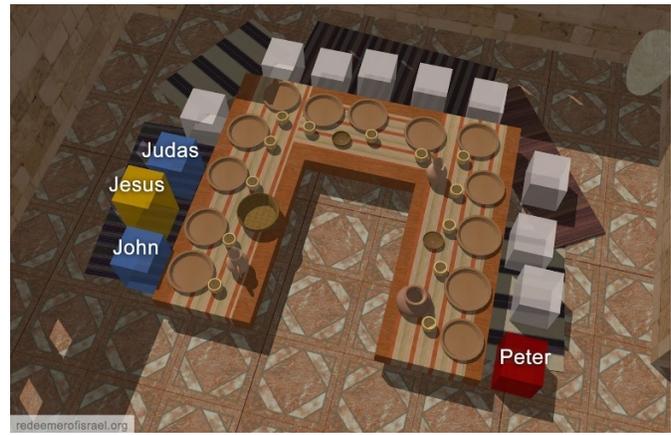
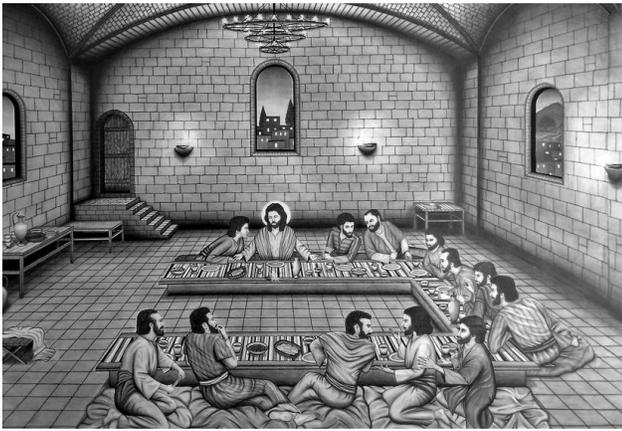
Some scholars wonder if Jews in the time of Jesus may have been divided as to which day one should eat the Passover meal. The only known group that observed Passover earlier than the temple was the Essenes. Their calendar (discovered in the Dead Sea Scrolls), indicates that they may have observed Passover Tuesday or Wednesday of the week Jesus died. The ruins of Qumran were abandoned during the reign of Herod the Great. Josephus tells us that the Essenes were so opposed to the Temple that they fought with Herod against the Temple establishment. They may have had large holdings of property in Jerusalem during the Herodian period (as a reward for loyalty to Herod) because Josephus says that the city had a gate known as the Gate of the Essenes. It may be more than a coincidence that the traditional place for the room of the last Supper is only a stone's throw from the Gate of the Essenes. Could this gate have led to an Essene quarter in Jerusalem? Just outside this gate were found Essene-style ritual baths.

Although the Last Supper may have been in an Essene Quarter of the Jerusalem, it goes without saying that Jesus certainly was not an Essene. But Jesus may have had a feeling that he might not still be alive when Passover came, yet he wanted to observe this last feast with his disciples. If he ate it earlier, more time would be allowed for his three questionings by the Temple authorities and three Roman trials. A closed Essene community would have provided a private place for an uninterrupted final meal with his friends. Other evidence the meal may have been in an Essene monastic community is that Jesus instructs his disciples to find (go to the place where) "a man draws water?" (usually woman's work), and that there is no mention of women or children (Essenes were celibate).

Other scholars disagree about the Essene connection. They point out that Essenes ate at tables, not reclining (reclining at table was a Greek/Roman custom), that they ate from individual plates (not sharing dishes as the Gospels make clear was the case at the Last Supper), and excavations at Qumran discovered a few graves of women. This all may be true, but that doesn't mean that Jesus and the disciples followed Essene customs. None of these call into question the theory about an Essene location.

Religious art typically pictures biblical events in the style of homes and clothes from the time of the artist, not from the time of the actual events. Most depictions of the Last Supper show them sitting on chairs at tables. This cannot be so, the Gospel of John clearly states that it was a reclining meal (Jn 13:23).

Luke describes a large "furnished" upstairs guest room. This Greek word translated "furnished" is normally the word used for describing a "triclinium – a low three-sided reclining table:



In the drawings, notice that four of the places at the table are identified. The guests typically are seated in order of ranking or age - remember Jesus's teaching that it is better to sit at the lowest place at the table and be asked to move up than to presume to sit at the place of honor (Lk 14:10). In the drawing, the host (Jesus) of the meal would take his place in the second spot (the host would have honored guests to his right and left, with the most honored guest to his left – remember how the mother of James and John asked Jesus to grant them to sit on his left and right in the Kingdom of God (Mt 20:20-21)?

When reclining at a meal, it was the custom to lean on one's left elbow and eat with their right hand. John 13:23 says that John ("the disciple Jesus loved" Jn 21:20) was leaning on Jesus breast (John's back to Jesus). This requires him to be seated on the right of Jesus and in the first seat. One might have expected this place to go to one of the three lead disciples Jesus relied on the most (Peter, James, or John) – see Lk 9:28; Mk 14:33. So we are not surprised to see John in the second ranking place. You would then expect Peter or James to be to Jesus' left. But not so...

There are two indications Judas was reclining at the left-hand of Jesus, as the honored guest of Jesus:

- 1: there was the custom of offering a piece of meat to the guest of honor (Jn 13:26) to the left of the host;
- 2: Judas had to be seated close enough to Jesus to be eating from the same dishes because, when John leans back to whisper the question of Jesus who it was to betray him, Jesus replies, "someone dipping in the same bowl with me." Imagine the anguish of Judas, invited by Jesus to sit in the place of honor with Jesus leaning against his chest, knowing he had betrayed Jesus (Jn 13:23-26)!

There are three indications that Peter was reclining at the far right (lowest) place. All these evidences are indirect, however.

- 1: Luke records that there was a dispute as to "who was the greatest" as they walked into the room. As Jesus put Peter and John in charge of the arrangements, they probably pictured themselves sitting on either side of the host (John did get that honor). It may be that in reaction to Jesus inviting Judas to have the guest of honor seat, Peter angrily plopped down at the least honorable seat ("I'll show Jesus!").
- 2: In all ancient meals of this type, someone (a servant or the lowest ranking person) would wash the dusty feet of the guests. If Peter had chosen the lowest place, it would have fallen to him to do the dirty job of washing the feet – but it appears he refused. That's why the Gospel of John says that halfway through the meal, the feet were still unwashed. Jesus sees a teachable moment and takes the basin and towel and does Peter's job for him. The text implies that Peter is last – imagine Peter's anguish as he waits as one-by-one Jesus inches closer and closer to him. No wonder he protests when Jesus gets to him!
- 3: Peter had to be in a position where he could get John's attention and motion for him to ask Jesus who the betrayer would be, without feeling Jesus or the others would necessarily overhear (Jn 13:23-26).

Jesus Points to His Betrayer (Mt 26:20-25; Mk 14:17-21; Lk 22:14,21-23; Jn 13:21-30)

Jesus says one will betray him. They ask, "Is it I, Lord?" Jesus says that the one who dips in the same bowl with him is the betrayer. Judas is exposed and slinks away.

The Institution of the Lord's Supper (Mt 26:26-29; Mk 14:22-25; Lk 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26)

The words of institution and the sharing of bread and wine do not appear in John's Gospel. Instead, we find the only account of the foot-washing. With the words of institution, Jesus identifies himself with the Passover lamb, symbol of the deliverance of God's people. A complete reflection on the Lord's Supper will have to wait for a future study, as there is more than we can cover at this time.

Farewell Discourse and "High Priestly Prayer" in John (Jn 13:18 - 17:26)

This large body of teachings and prayers, some of which are set at the meal and some on their way to Gethsemane (Jn 14:30 "Come now, let us leave"), are unique to John's Gospel. All this teaching/prayer takes place somewhere on the Jerusalem side of the Kidron Valley. The teachings/prayer includes the following: Jesus the Way to the Father; He is the vine, we are the branches; the promise of the Holy Spirit; the world's hatred; the work of the Holy Spirit; Disciple's sadness will be turned to joy; victory over the world; and Jesus and the Father are One. In John 17 we find the prayer of Jesus ("High Priestly Prayer") for himself, for his Disciples, and for all of us who will one day believe. This is the actual "Lord's Prayer." What we call The Lord's Prayer is really a model prayer for us to follow. They cross the stream and arrive at an "olive grove" (I don't think John ever mentions Gethsemane, as he doesn't focus on Jesus' agony about his suffering in the same way the synoptics do).

Jesus Warns About Defections (Mt 26:31-35; Mk 14:27-31; Lk 22:31-38; Jn 13:36-38)

In all four Gospels, Jesus predicts Peter's denial and Peter swears he will remain faithful. Luke 22:35-38 is a very problematic passage (only in Luke). What are we to make of Jesus' command that the Disciples should sell their cloak and purchase a sword? "The disciples said, 'See, Lord, here are two swords.' 'That is enough,' (Jesus) replied."

Jesus in Gethsemane (Mt 26:36-46; Mk 14:32-42; Lk 22:40-46; Jn 18:1-2)

In the synoptic Gospels, after the meal Jesus and the Disciples (minus Judas) cross through the city, out an eastern gate, down the Kidron Valley, and up the Mount of Olives (passing cemeteries), and into an olive grove called Gethsemane. In John's Gospel, Jesus prays aloud for the Disciples to hear, leads them to the olive grove on the Mount of Olives, does not pray, but is almost immediately arrested. In the synoptics, Jesus goes off by himself to pray, asking the Disciples to watch guard, but they fall asleep.

Jesus prays "Let this cup be taken from me." What is he talking about? It may be that he is referring the "tear cups" that were in common use by Jews of his day. Apparently it was believed that tears were so precious that as they wept they would catch their tears in a jar and seal it with a cork. Psalm 56:8 says, "You number and record my wanderings; put my tears into Your bottle – are they not in Your book?" If this is what Jesus means, it is a way of saying, "take this grief/these tears from me." Recall that the Gospels tell us that a woman "washed Jesus' feet with her tears" (Lk 7:38). She could have wept on him feet, but it may also mean that she was so grateful to Jesus that she poured out all her collected tears on his feet – a powerfully symbolic gesture, indeed! (Today there is a small church on the Mount of Olives with ornamentation that resembles tear cups.

The word "Gethsemane" means "oil press." In his agony, Jesus must have felt "pressed" – so much so that the Luke says he sweat blood (Lk 22:44).

The Arrest (Mt 26:47-56; Mk 14:43-52; Lk 22:47-53; Jn 18:1-11)

Jesus is betrayed with a kiss by Judas and arrested by the Temple guards. One of the disciples (John tells us it was Peter) takes his sword and strikes out to kill, but misses and cuts off the ear of a servant/slave of the high priest (John gives us his name – perhaps he later became a believer?). Jesus rebukes the disciple (and in Luke, heals the ear). Mark adds a curious tag at the end about "a certain young man" who was following at a distance who is confronted, and as he flees, his tunic is pulled from his body so that he had to run home naked. Most scholars think Mark is telling a story on himself. We will continue with the Passion Narrative next session.