

Chronological Aspects of 'Gospel Harmony'

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The recently published excursion by B. S. Childs into the area of New Testament criticism, under the title *The New Testament as Canon: an Introduction*,¹ contains many challenges to accepted methods of New Testament study. Coming into the area as an outsider (ie an Old Testament specialist), Childs argues that traditional 'Introductions to the New Testament' have ignored the most important question. They have argued at length about precisely how, when and by whom the New Testament books were composed, and have taken opposing stands on questions of historicity, but they have not considered how these books function for us as the canonical scriptures of Christianity.

One striking indication of Childs' distinctive approach is the fact that while he has virtually nothing to say about the synoptic problem (ie the process whereby three of the gospels came to be written in such a tantalizingly similar and yet distinct form), he devotes nearly seventy pages to the question of 'gospel harmony', by which he means the problem of how we should respond to a canon which has presented us with four differing accounts of Jesus instead of a single 'authorized biography'. But this is no call for an uncritical conservatism. Childs rejects equally the conservative desire to make all the gospels say exactly the same and the critical approach which is interested only in paring away the later 'accretions' in order to uncover 'what really happened'. His concern is rather to listen to the four accounts side by side, recognizing that their differences pose historical problems, but not allowing those problems to distract him from what the evangelists are actually saying.

'Harmonization' of the details of the gospel narratives began as early as the second century, and has remained a major interest of conservative scholars. The more critical scholarship has emphasized the discrepancies between the gospels, and has declared the attempts of harmonizers both futile and perverse; the more conservative scholars have undertaken to prove that every detail can be accounted for as an accurate record of what took place. Great ingenuity has been exercised in the search for possible ways of reconciling the apparently irreconcilable, and many of the proposed solutions strike critical observers as artificial to the point of absurdity.

In this situation of mutual incomprehension and of increasing polarization, Childs' approach seems to offer the possibility of a way out

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of what has become a rather sterile debate. By considering the question of harmony worth discussing at all, he has challenged the general critical assumption that harmonization is a pursuit unworthy of scholarly attention, But by refusing to allow the question to be limited to arguments over what is or is not historically feasible, he has rightly insisted that it be dealt with in the context of a wider understanding of the gospels as canonical scripture.

This is a healthy corrective, but it is not, either in intention or in execution, a vote for a traditionally conservative harmonistic approach. When Childs goes on to discuss specific

¹ B. S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: an Introduction* (London, 1984).

examples of gospel discrepancies, while he has much of value to say on the messages to be drawn from the passages concerned, he generally leaves the historical problems unresolved. Sometimes he clearly regards the accounts as irreconcilable in detail, but in any case he does not seem to regard such resolution as important. It is, rather, a distraction from listening to what the gospels are saying.

But what are they saying? Childs suggests that this question is to be answered not, as exegesis has generally done, by trying to reconstruct the author's intention, but rather by reading the texts 'canonically', ie by considering how they have spoken, and still speak, in the life and doctrine of the church which has adopted these texts as its basis of belief and life. It is this orientation which makes it possible for him to sit loose to more historical questions, since the details of what happened belong together with the process of composition and the original author's intention in the area of the text's pre-history, not of its canonical use and meaning. It is what the text is saying now, rather than what it said originally or how it came to be as it is, that is his concern.

This approach raises in an acute form the now familiar literary debate (which is pursued much more widely than only in biblical studies) between those who believe in the autonomy of the text and those who believe that our understanding of it must be governed by the author's intention in so far as we are able to recover it. A really thorough-going belief in the autonomy of the text does away with any need for historical study in biblical interpretation. To discover the cultural and historical setting of the writing of the text, to reconstruct the literary conventions within which it would originally have been understood, even to discern its place in the development of the author's thought and ministry, all these traditional concerns of biblical exegesis become secondary, indeed ultimately irrelevant, when the meaning of the text is understood relative to its impact on us in itself, without reference to what the author meant it to convey.

As one who is not persuaded of the autonomy of the text, while I welcome Childs' attempt to bring the question of gospel harmony back onto the scholarly agenda, I would like to suggest that it should not be divorced from a consideration of the author's intention. And if it is the

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case that part (though of course not all) of the intention of the biblical writers is to convey factual information, then it does seem to be appropriate, indeed necessary, to pay attention to those areas where their factual information appears to be in conflict, rather than to dismiss the question in favour of an exclusive concentration on the more 'spiritual' aspect of their message.

But this does not mean that I, any more than Childs, want to return to the sort of 'harmonization' which caused Osiander in the sixteenth century to conclude that Jairus' daughter was twice raised from the dead, and which in more recent times has led to the proposal that Peter denied Jesus not three times (as all four gospels say!) but six.² It means rather a serious attempt to understand how the original writers expected their texts to be taken, an attempt which deals with the texts as works of literature belonging to a particular cultural context, rather than as jigsaw puzzles made up of unconnected pieces awaiting the ingenuity of the modern interpreter to fit them together into a composite picture—an ingenuity which is

² H. Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1976) 174-176.

required to be that much greater in view of the fact that many of the pieces are missing, and no one is sure how many there originally were.

In this article I want to discuss this issue of harmonization in relation to the author's intended meaning by concentrating on one traditional area of harmonization, that of chronology. This is not a side-issue. A high proportion of the factual discrepancies between the gospels which critical scholarship has pointed out fall in this area, where different gospels record what are apparently the same events in a different relative order, or where they give specific settings for the same event which seem irreconcilable. Indeed Childs mentions that B. F. Westcott 'regarded the chief problem of harmonization to be the divergence among the Gospels in temporal sequence'.³ Childs rightly sees this as an overstatement, and I would not want to suggest that to find a satisfactory way of resolving chronological differences would eliminate the problem of gospel harmony. But it remains true that much debate has centred on such issues, and it is possible that an approach which offers the hope of resolving some such questions may be in principle applicable to other harmonistic problems also.

In this area of chronological discrepancies I would like to suggest that a consideration of the authors' intentions, while it will not solve all problems, may suggest that some of the traditional areas of dispute were all the time pseudo-problems. The simple question to be posed is how far the evangelists' records were meant to be chronologically structured. While in a modern biography we might assume that events were related in chronological order unless the author clearly indicated otherwise, have we any right to make the same assumption for the gospels? The critical dictum that 'the gospels are not biographies', while it has rightly been questioned in relation to the nature of biographical writing in the

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ancient world,⁴ was right at least in its observation that they are not structured like most modern biographies. They might better be described as anthologies of stories and sayings of Jesus, and it is the privilege of the compiler of an anthology to arrange the material according to whatever scheme he feels appropriate, a privilege of which, to judge by their differences, the gospel writers have to some extent availed themselves. The rather vague links by which they generally connect episodes ('then', 'in those days', 'after these things', etc) do not suggest an annalistic structure, and while Luke declares that he has presented his material *kathexēs*, 'in order', he does not state that the sort of order he means is chronological.

A careful study of the arrangement of material in the gospels often reveals a more thematic connection between the sections. A very obvious example is in chapters 5-9 of Matthew, where an extensive collection of Jesus' teaching on discipleship (much of which occurs in other contexts in Luke) is followed by an equally striking collection of stories illustrating Jesus' miraculous activity. Thus chapters 5-7 present Jesus the Messiah in his words, while chapters 8-9 present his messianic deeds. The whole section thus prepares the scene for the following account of his mission and of the varying response of his contemporaries. (Most commentators go further and discern in Matthew 8-9 a deliberate structuring of the miracles in three groups of three. It is of course possible that they happened just like that, but is it likely?) A similarly careful composition can be discerned throughout the gospel of Matthew, adding up to a powerful dramatic presentation of the person and mission of Jesus leading up to the inevitable confrontation with Jewish orthodoxy, which in turn culminates in his death

³ Childs, *NT as Canon*, 148.

⁴ C. H. Talbert, *What is a Gospel?* (Philadelphia, 1977).

and resurrection. The whole gospel is thus an effectively structured portrait of Jesus. Students of Matthew vary in the structural pattern which they regard as basic to the gospel, but all agree that the whole book has been carefully composed for literary and theological effect. Similar observations are regularly made with regard to the other gospels.

There is, of course, no necessary conflict between such a dramatic or thematic ordering of material and a strict adherence to chronological order. But we are at least entitled to ask how important the chronology was to the author, and whether he may not sometimes have recorded events and teaching 'out of order' so as to achieve a more effective presentation of the significance of Jesus' ministry. To observe that there is a basic agreement between the gospels on the broad outline of Jesus' life and ministry does not require us to assume also that every event is intended to be understood as occurring in the order recorded. Since that order does in fact vary in detail between the gospels, the question is clearly important.

I want to ask, then, whether some of the traditional problems of chronological harmonization are really problems at all. If the gospel

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writers are not intending to teach us the chronological order of events, where is the problem?

This sounds, no doubt, like a quite arbitrary magic wand to be waved over any suggested discrepancy. Wherever the order varies, invoke a non-chronological principle of arrangement, and the problem is solved! But I am not arguing for any such simplistic approach. All I want to suggest is that in some cases non-chronological arrangement is a possibility to be considered. The problem then is to know where the writers intended a chronological arrangement and where they did not, and to avoid the temptation of the convenient assumption that they were not interested in chronology wherever problems of harmonization arise in this area.

The sort of factors which will be important here will be whether explicit chronological markers occur in the text, whether any theological or other implications seem to be drawn out from the order or concurrence of events, or whether there is an apparent dependence of one story on another having already occurred. On the other hand, a proposal to treat the order as non-chronological will carry more conviction in a case where some other principle of composition can be shown to account better for the form of the text.

In order to show how these considerations may affect our understanding of particular problem passages, I propose to consider a few of the issues arising in what appears to be one of the clearest chronological sequences in the gospels, and yet one in which several notorious problems of harmonization occur, that is the last phase of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem, the so-called 'Holy Week'.⁵ Even with this restriction, the treatment must necessarily be selective,

⁵ Even this general designation is open to chronological question. Mk. 11-13 is not explicitly linked chronologically with 14-16, and while the events of Mk. 11:1-25 are given a clear three-day framework, no time indications are given for the contents of 11:27-13:37. So while Jn. 12:1, 12 sets the events from the entry to Jerusalem to the passion within the Passover context, the inclusion of all the events of Mark 11-16 within one week is a matter of traditional inference rather than of explicit statement. Further, it has been argued that the entry to Jerusalem and the cleansing of the temple (the latter of which John in any case places elsewhere in his gospel, though again in an explicitly Passover context) would fit more appropriately at the Feast of Tabernacles (so T. W. Manson, *BJRL* 33 (1950/1) 271-282; C. W. F. Smith, *JBL* 79 (1960) 315-327) or that of the Dedication (so B. A. Mastin, *NTS* 16 (1969/70) 76-82), in which case the events of 'Holy Week' may have occurred over a

and the discussion of the specific issues presented in broad terms rather than worked out in detail.

THE FIG-TREE

Mark 11:1-20 gives a detailed account of certain events following Jesus' arrival at Jerusalem in what is ostensibly chronological order. His entry to Jerusalem took him straight into the temple, where he had a look around and then, 'as it was already late', went out to Bethany to spend the night (v 11). 'On the following day', on the way back into Jerusalem from Bethany, he cursed the fig-tree (vv 12-14). The cleansing of the temple follows on their arrival in Jerusalem on this second day, and then 'when evening came' Jesus and the disciples left the city again (v 19). 'In the morning', presumably on the way back into the city, they passed the fig-tree again, and found it now withered (v 20). This is a clear, consistent account of the events of some forty-eight hours.

Matthew 21 differs in two ways. First, there is no suggestion of a

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night's delay between the initial entry to Jerusalem and the cleansing of the temple: immediately after the entry Matthew continues, 'And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought...' (v 12). It is only after this that Matthew mentions going out to spend the night at Bethany (v 17). Matthew thus apparently presents Jesus' action as an immediate and spontaneous response to a provocative situation, whereas Mark allows us to see it as a deliberate gesture, coolly planned overnight. But while these impressions of Jesus' action are undeniably different, it is surely pedantic to find a factual discrepancy here. It is Matthew's regular practice to omit details in the narratives which he finds unnecessary or distracting, and to relate only the essentials of the story (see eg his drastic abbreviation of the vivid stories of 5:1-43 into a mere 16 verses, 8:28-34; 9:18-26, or his omission of Luke's mention of the centurion's Jewish friends, Lk. 7:3-6, cf Mt.8:5-8). The one-day interval would be such a detail. Matthew therefore mentions only one night at Bethany, after the cleansing of the temple, which presumably corresponds to the second night in Mark.

But the situation is complicated, in the second place, by the incident of the fig-tree. Integral to the Marcan story is the repeated visit to the tree on successive mornings. But Matthew's telescoping of the story has removed one of those mornings. So what in Mark appears as a two-stage story (cursing on one day, discovery of withering on the next) is in Matthew a single incident after the (second?) night at Bethany which follows the cleansing of the temple. Is this another editorial simplification by Matthew? Perhaps, but in this case he does seem to be interested in the chronology in a way which puts him into apparent conflict with Mark, for he adds that the fig-tree withered *parachrēma*, 'immediately', when Jesus cursed it, and he further reinforces this emphasis in the wording of the disciples' response which again focuses on the fact that the tree withered *parachrēma*. This suggests that the immediacy of the miracle is the point which Matthew wishes to stress, as the basis for the following teaching on the limitless opportunities open to faith.

period of up to six months! Do Jesus' words in Mk. 14:49 also point in the direction of a longer period in Jerusalem?

Now a fig-tree does not normally wither in a mere twenty-four hours from being 'in leaf', so that even in its Marcan form the story is of a very sudden and miraculous effect from Jesus' curse, and the same lessons about faith are rightly drawn in Mark's account as in Matthew's. Even if the process took longer than Matthew's account suggests, his *parachrēma* is still amply justified. But it does seem that Matthew's account (if, as most scholars assume, it was dependent on that of Mark) has subordinated strict chronology to a more effective dramatic presentation of the incident in order to draw out more powerfully what he understands to be its theological implications.

I have operated so far on the assumption that things actually happened as Mark's more circumstantial account relates, and that Matthew has deliberately telescoped the Marcan story. There is,

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however, another possible explanation. Suppose, as not a few scholars are now prepared to believe, that Matthew's story is the original, and that it is Mark who has modified the chronological sequence. In that case he would have deliberately separated into two stages an event which in fact occurred all at once.

But why should Mark do such a thing? An answer is immediately to hand in one of the most widely recognized characteristics of Mark's literary method, his so-called 'interpolation' or 'sandwich' technique.⁶ Quite frequently a story is interrupted while another incident is related, after which the original story is concluded. While it is possible that this device may in some cases be used purely to maintain the reader's interest (one of my students pointed out that it is similar to Ronnie Corbett's narrative style!), in several cases it seems clear that stories are thus interwoven so that one may throw light on the other. In this case it is generally agreed that, even without this Marcan interweaving, the cursing of the fig-tree is to be understood as symbolic of the fruitlessness of Israel, which is more overtly condemned in Jesus' action in the temple. In Mark's version this point is strongly reinforced by the narrative structure:

| | |
|----------|-------------------------------------|
| v 11 | The temple observed |
| vv 12-14 | The fig-tree observed and denounced |
| vv 15-19 | The temple denounced |
| vv 20f | The fig-tree destroyed |

Later the analogy is completed by the explicit prediction that the temple, too, will be destroyed (13:2).⁷

So there would be a clear theological reason for Mark to restructure the story into two stages in order to achieve this suggestive 'sandwiching' of the two events. We have thus seen good theological reason for either evangelist to have modified the chronology; Matthew by telescoping a two-stage event into a single incident, or Mark by splitting into two stages an incident which in fact happened all at once. Which of these is the more probable explanation will depend on one's overall view of the extent and the direction of literary dependence

⁶ This is noted by most commentators and writers on Mark. A useful brief account, with a list of examples, is in H. C. Kee, *Community of the New Age* (London, 1977) 54-56.

⁷ See the full discussion of this symbolism in W. R. Telford's study of Mark 11, *The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree* (Sheffield, 1980).

between Matthew and Mark, and on one's estimate of their respective literary methods. But what is clear is that one or the other (or conceivably both) has not felt bound to follow a strictly chronological order. Either the cursing and the dialogue resulting from the withering of the tree occurred all at once after the cleansing of the temple, or they were two separate episodes with the cleansing in between; both cannot be chronologically correct.

Here, then, it seems clear that at least one evangelist has deliberately subordinated chronological order to the effective communication in narrative form of the theological significance which he saw in the cursing of the fig-tree. This need be no embarrassment for the evangelical reader once he is prepared to recognize that chronological sequence is

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not the only literary procedure permissible. If either Matthew or Mark was not at this point intending to write in strict accordance with chronology, it is perverse to label non-chronological order as an 'error'.

THE 'CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE'

In the previous case the chronological difference involved was a mere twenty-four hours. Much more striking is the divergence between John and the synoptic gospels over the setting of the incident usually described as 'the cleansing of the temple'. Here the whole length of Jesus' ministry separates the two settings offered. In John it is recorded very early in the gospel, after the 'first sign' at Cana; it is the first public action of Jesus in this gospel, his first recorded confrontation with 'the Jews' (2:18), and precedes any Galilean activity other than the Cana incident. But in the synoptic gospels it occurs in the context of Jesus' final visit to Jerusalem, following his dramatic entry to the city at the head of a crowd of Galilean supporters. The record in each case is of an apparently single-handed onslaught at Passover time on the traders in sacrificial animals and the money-changers, which succeeded (at least temporarily) in driving them out, and which led to a challenge from the Jewish religious leaders as to Jesus' authority to act in this way. Most scholars therefore assume that it is the same incident which is recorded in each gospel. In that case either John or the synoptics has the event in quite the wrong position chronologically.

The traditional evangelical response has been to claim that in fact two separate incidents are recorded, one at the outset of Jesus' ministry (during the early Jerusalem ministry to which the synoptics make no reference), the other at its close. If Jesus could act in this way once, why not twice? In principle this is not an unreasonable suggestion. Two similar incidents might well occur within a period of perhaps two or three years, and a situation which excited Jesus' anger once might be expected, if it was repeated, to provoke a similar reaction again. In some cases of similar narratives in the gospels some such explanation seems preferable to the evolution of circumstantially conflicting accounts from a single incident. For instance, the four stories of Jesus being anointed by a woman (Mt. 26:6-13; Mk. 14:3-9; Lk. 7:36-50; Jn. 12:1-8) contain several variations of detail which are hard to explain on the basis of a single incident, and the feedings of the 5,000 and the 4,000, for all their similarity in outline, are clearly presented by Matthew and Mark (each of whom records both incidents, not just one) as separate incidents in different settings (one Jewish, one Gentile, probably).

But in this case there are reasons for doubting this sort of explanation. For one thing, apart from the question of date, there are

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no significant factual discrepancies between the accounts; despite some differences in detail and in theological perspective the similarity in the essential narratives is remarkable (and indeed John's version is closer in detail to those of Matthew and Mark than is that of Luke!). If it were not for the assumption that both John and the synoptics intend to place the incident in chronological sequence, no-one would have dreamed of suggesting that there were two such occasions. Nor does any of the gospels hint at a second such occurrence (as in the case of the 5,000 and the 4,000); it is simply that they locate it differently.

But the decisive objection to the theory of two 'cleansings' is the nature of the act itself. Recent studies by B. F. Meyer⁸ and E. P. Sanders⁹ have effectively reminded us that this was not an attempt at moral or liturgical reform such as any religious teacher might have carried out, but rather a daring and provocative 'demonstration', setting out both Jesus' conception of a radical, eschatological change in God's dealings with Israel and his own claim to be the Messiah, the 'Lord of the temple', through whom it was to be carried out. No less than the equally provocative gesture of his ride into Jerusalem on a donkey, enacting the messianic prophecy of Zechariah 9:9-10, this was a deliberate throwing down of the gauntlet, a challenge to Israel's existing leadership which could not be ignored.

If such an incident had occurred at the very outset of Jesus' ministry, could the authorities have ignored it for two years or so? Such a decisive declaration at the beginning surely leaves no room for the gradual growth of suspicion and opposition which the synoptic gospels record. Nor can it be squared with the repeated emphasis in the synoptic gospels on Jesus' reluctance to make any open claim to messianic authority during the majority of his ministry, until the final showdown when he deliberately confronted Israel with his claims, after which his arrest and trial as a messianic pretender followed swiftly and inevitably. In the context where the synoptic gospels place it the incident fits perfectly into this scheme, but if another such event had occurred two years earlier, their whole presentation of Jesus' approach to Israel is thrown out of gear. The theory of two cleansings thus depends on a quite unrealistic minimizing of the significance and impact of the event; once it is recognized as the provocative 'demonstration' which its Jewish context demands, the synoptic account of Jesus' ministry effectively rules out a second such incident at an earlier date.

For these reasons I regard it as highly probable that John has recorded at the beginning of his gospel an event which in fact occurred at the end of Jesus' ministry.¹⁰ Is this then an error by John, or a deliberate deception of his readers? This would be so only if John's gospel were clearly presented as an account in chronological sequence of what Jesus did. But is this the only, or indeed the most likely, way to read the opening chapters of the gospel?

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⁸ B. F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London, 1979) 168-170, 197-202.

⁹ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London, 1985) 61-71 and passim.

¹⁰ This majority view has been challenged most recently by J. A. T. Robinson, in E. Bammel & C. F. D. Moule (eds), *Jesus and the Politics of his Day* (Cambridge, 1984) 455-461. In order to play down any political implications in the incident, Robinson takes it as purely 'an act of religious zeal for the purity of the holy place, a prophetic protest', and therefore believes that John has recorded it in its proper chronological position. The synoptic writers were obliged to move it to the final act of the drama because their structure had no room for any activity by Jesus in Jerusalem before that time.

The book as a whole is explicitly presented as a selection of Jesus' words and deeds recorded in order to inculcate faith (20:30-31). It begins not with an account of his birth or early life, but with a meditation on his true significance as the revelation of God (1:1-18), which leads on to a series of cameos presenting the witness of John and of the first disciples to Jesus as the Messiah (1:19-51). Jesus himself comes centre stage in chapter 2, where initially we have recorded the miracle in which he first 'manifested his glory' to the disciples, a miracle which at the same time symbolizes the replacement of the old order of Judaism (2:1-11); then follows this incident, which demonstrates his messianic authority and again illustrates his decisive significance in relation to Israel's worship, together with the resultant conflict with the authorities and the favourable response of the crowds (2:13-25).

Are we intended to see this as a chronological sequence of events? It is true that in chapter 1 the incidents are linked by temporal expressions: 'the next day' (1:29), 'the next day again' (1:35), 'the next day' (1:43), after which chapter 2 begins with 'on the third day'. This looks like a deliberate sequence from 1:19 to 2:11, so deliberate that some have seen it as not so much chronological as 'a dramatic framework, perhaps paralleling the seven days of the first creation in Genesis 1'.¹¹ But in 2:12 the sequence becomes more vague ('after this', and a stay at Capernaum of 'a few days'), and there is no explicit temporal link between this transition verse and the Passover visit to Jerusalem in 2:13, nor between the events of that visit (2:13-25) and the following chapters.

All this suggests that John allows us to construe the position of the temple incident not so much as the first event of Jesus' public ministry, but rather as part of an effective 'collage' of incidents from Jesus' life put together at the outset to introduce the one who is to be the subject of the gospel. The particular function of this incident is to apprise the reader of the messianic authority of Jesus, and of the basic challenge which he presents to established Judaism, a perspective which will guide the reader with deeper understanding through the controversies with 'the Jews' which will be so prominent a feature of the ensuing gospel narratives.

If this understanding of John's literary method is anywhere near the mark, then to speak of a chronological conflict between John and the synoptic writers in the placing of the temple incident is to miss the point, and to impose on John a chronological style of composition which may have been far from his intention at this point.

The two examples so far considered have both illustrated the possibility that a difference in order between the gospels need not always be construed as a problem for gospel harmony, since it is arguable that in these cases at least one of the evangelists is not compiling his record in chronological sequence. But I am not wanting to

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suggest that *all* differences in order may be dismissed by invoking non-chronological structure. The fact that sometimes the evangelists may have operated on a structural principle other than temporal sequence does not mean that they were never interested in chronology.

¹¹ L. Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Exeter, 1969) 140. Morris himself prefers to regard the sequence as evidence of personal reminiscence. See further R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (New York, 1966) 1, 105-106. C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, 1963) 153n, sees the reference to 'days' as serving 'rather to articulate the stages of the exposition of the theme than to give a day-to-day chronology'.

Sometimes they offer what appears to be deliberate and significant chronological information. If in such a case there is a prima-facie discrepancy it is not good enough to say that the problem is 'merely' one of chronology. If we have reason to believe that the authors intended their chronological statements to be taken literally, and if what they say is apparently in conflict, then there is a problem for gospel harmony. We turn now, therefore, to such a case.

THE LAST SUPPER AND THE PASSOVER¹²

That Jesus died on a Friday, the day before the sabbath, is the clear teaching of all the gospels (Mt. 27:62; 28:1; Mk. 15:42; 16:1f; Lk. 23:56; 24:1; Jn. 19:31; 20:1), and is now seldom questioned.¹³ Furthermore it seems clear that all the gospels understand the Last Supper as taking place the previous night, Thursday (though we shall notice a modern theory which questions this). So far all is clear and consistent within the gospel tradition.

But Jesus' death was at Passover season, and the area of uncertainty is over which day in the week the Passover fell in that year. The relevant dates are Nisan 14, on the afternoon of which the Passover lambs were ritually slaughtered in the temple, and Nisan 15, which began (the Jewish day commenced at sunset) with the eating of the Passover meal in the evening after the lambs were killed. John's account has generally been understood to indicate that Jesus was killed before the Passover meal was eaten, ie on Nisan 14, at the same time as the lambs were being slaughtered in the temple; but the synoptic gospels are understood to indicate that the Last Supper was itself the Passover meal, which followed the killing of the lambs, so that Jesus died the next day, Nisan 15. Both these interpretations are based on explicitly chronological statements (on the one side particularly Jn. 13:1; 18:28; 19:14; on the other side Mk. 14:12 and parallels, together with the clear implication that the Last Supper was a Passover meal, cf Mk. 14:16; Lk. 22:15). But how can they both be right? Is this not a case of clearly deliberate chronological information which is in irreconcilable conflict?

The resultant debate is vast and complicated. While many scholars are content to conclude that one or the other account is wrong (though there is no clear consensus as to which is to be preferred!), many have attempted the apparently impossible task of harmonization. I will attempt a rough classification of the solutions on offer, leading up to a fuller presentation of the view I myself favour, before discussing the

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issue of principle involved, as to whether such harmonization is appropriate.

Solutions based on the possibility of divergent calendars

While John's time references clearly refer to the official celebration of the Passover, is it possible that Jesus and his disciples were observing a different calendar, or at least a different

¹² The material that follows is based on an article entitled 'La Chronologie de la semaine sainte', published in *Hokhma* 9 (1978) 8-16, here substantially rewritten and updated.

¹³ Arguments for crucifixion on Wednesday or Thursday have been advanced solely on the basis of a desire to fit in a literal understanding of the 'three days and three nights' of Mt. 12:40, and in defiance of the clear chronological indicators of the narratives. For an account and critique of such arguments see H. W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1977) 65-71.

method of reckoning days, by which they would hold their Passover meal a day (or more) earlier than the official date? In that case the synoptic gospels could be correctly recording the Last Supper as Jesus' Passover meal, while John would be equally correctly referring to the official Passover feast still to come. Several theories along these lines are on offer, though unfortunately they are necessarily in competition with each other—Jesus cannot have been observing all the different calendars suggested at the same time!

Sadducees v Pharisees

Daniel Chwolson proposed in 1892 that in order to avoid 'working' on the sabbath the lambs were slaughtered a day early in this particular year (since the killing could not be completed before sunset, when the sabbath, Nisan 15, would begin), and that the Pharisees then proceeded to eat the Passover meal immediately in accordance with their interpretation of Exodus 12:10, while the Sadducees waited until the official date. Jesus, it is assumed, would have followed the Pharisaic practice.¹⁴ This theory rests on a series of speculative assumptions.

Rather better supported is the view of P. Billerbeck,¹⁵ which is regarded by I. H. Marshall as 'the most plausible'.¹⁶ Billerbeck offers evidence of a continuing disagreement between Pharisees and Sadducees (or more specifically the Boethusians, an influential family within the Sadducean group) over the correct dates for some of the festivals, in particular that the Boethusians wanted to observe the Passover on a sabbath whenever possible. He suggests that in this particular year, by manipulating the announcement of the sighting of the new moon,¹⁷ they had caused Nisan 15 to fall on the sabbath, but the Pharisees refused to accept this decision and maintained that the Friday was Nisan 15. There is certainly some evidence for disputes about the dates of festivals, but not for such a dispute in the year in question, and the assumption that Jesus would have taken the Pharisees' side is also questionable. Moreover, there is no evidence, nor is it likely, that a separate celebration of the Passover was ever permitted by the Sadducean authorities who controlled the temple where the lambs must be killed.

As an indication of the arbitrary nature of such theories, it is amusing to note that, according to G. Ogg, 'some' (unspecified) have argued in precisely the opposite direction, that it was the Sadducees who

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celebrated the festival a day earlier than the Pharisees, and that Jesus agreed with the former!¹⁸

Palestine v diaspora

M. H. Shepherd¹⁹ has argued, equally conjecturally, that whereas Diaspora Jews operated a fixed calendar, those in Palestine continued to fix the beginning of the month by the sighting

¹⁴ Chwolson's view is conveniently set out and discussed by G. Ogg, *The Chronology of the Public Ministry of Jesus* (Cambridge, 1940) 218-221.

¹⁵ SB 2, 847-853.

¹⁶ I. H. Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper* (Exeter, 1980) 74. Marshall summarizes the theory sympathetically on pp 71-72.

¹⁷ For a more specific account of what is meant by 'sighting of the new light (moon)' see J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (ET, London, 1966) 36-37.

¹⁸ Ogg, *Chronology*, 217.

¹⁹ M. H. Shepherd, *JBL* 80 (1961) 123-132.

of the moon, so that there was sometimes a difference of one day between their calendars (as still happens today in some Muslim countries with the determination of the precise days of festivals). In that case Mark, writing in Rome, records his own church's tradition 'that Jesus died on a Friday in a year when that Friday was observed in the Dispersion as the Passover',²⁰ whereas John is aware of the actual state of affairs in Palestine, where the Passover was in fact celebrated a day later.

Galilee v Judaea

It is well known that there were differences between Galilee and Judaea in legal, religious and social matters. Did these include a difference in calendar, which might affect the incidence of Passover? At least three such proposals have been made, though their impact is weakened by the fact that they are all different, and mutually exclusive!

The simplest is the suggestion of J. Pickl²¹ that because the number of lambs to be killed was too large for one day, the custom developed that the Galileans killed theirs on Nisan 13 and the Judaeans on Nisan 14. A nice idea, but entirely speculative.

S. Docks²² suggests that the fixing of the beginning of the month (on the basis of the sighting of the moon) was the responsibility of regional commissions which operated independently. A slight difference in the time of sighting between Judaea and Galilee might then lead to a day's difference in the regional calendars, so that Jesus would observe the Galilean Passover a day earlier than the official Judaeans date.

H. W. Hoehner,²³ following J. Finegan,²⁴ believes the regional difference was in the way of reckoning a day; whereas most Jews reckoned the day as beginning at sunset, the Galileans, he suggests, followed an older tradition whereby the day began at sunrise. In that case their Nisan 14 (Thursday) would include both the killing and the eating of the lambs, whereas the Judaeans, for whom Nisan 14 did not begin until sunset on the Thursday, would not be able to kill their lambs until the Friday afternoon (still Nisan 14), and would then eat them after Nisan 15 had begun, one day after the Galilean meal. There is indeed some evidence to suggest that both systems of day-reckoning were still known among the Jews possibly even as late as the time of Jesus,²⁵ but it is agreed that the sunset-to-sunset system had become the norm well

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before the first century, and R. T. Beckwith,²⁶ who argues for the coexistence of the two systems, is not prepared to claim more than 'implicit' evidence for the sunrise-to-sunrise system.²⁷ At any rate, there is no evidence for a specific association of the sunrise-to-sunrise system with Galilee, and Finegan, to whom Hoehner appeals for this association, introduces it

²⁰ Ibid, 130.

²¹ J. Pickl, *The Messiah* (ET, St. Louis, 1946) 120-122.

²² S. Docks, *Chronologies néotestamentaires et vie de l'église primitive* (Gembloux, 1976) 21-29.

²³ Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, 85-90.

²⁴ J. Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Princeton University Press, 1964) 290-291.

²⁵ See J. Morgenstern, *Some Significant Antecedents of Christianity* (Leiden, 1966) 8-15.

²⁶ R. T. Beckwith, *EQ* 43 (1971) 218-227.

²⁷ Josephus, later in the first century, while clearly familiar with the standard Jewish sunset-to-sunset reckoning, does on one occasion speak of the morning as 'the next day' in relation to the preceding evening (*Ant.* 3, 248); but it may not be irrelevant to note that the Romans reckoned the day as beginning at midnight, and Josephus was a Roman citizen living and writing in Rome.

explicitly by 'Let us suppose...!' This theory, therefore, rests on no more substantial basis than the others so far considered.

Qumran v Jerusalem

All the calendrical theories so far considered suffer from the same basic defect, that none of them can supply any evidence that anyone ever did actually observe the Passover on a different day from that of the Jerusalem establishment. For this reason more attention has been attracted by a proposal which is at least based on solid evidence of a divergent calendar which was actually in operation in the first century.

A. Jaubert²⁸ has produced persuasive evidence of an older solar calendar (as opposed to the lunar calendar by which official Judaism operated) which is the basis of the chronological data of the Book of Jubilees, and which was still in use by the Qumran sect at the time of Jesus—a part of Qumran's deliberate distancing of itself from the Jerusalem establishment. According to this calendar the Passover meal would always fall on a Tuesday. Jaubert therefore suggests that Jesus followed this sectarian calendar, and that the Last Supper took place a full two and half days before the crucifixion.

The difficulty of reconciling this scheme with the clear indication of all the gospels that Jesus died on the day after the Last Supper has prevented many from accepting Jaubert's solution. Moreover, even though her proposed divergent calendar, unlike the others discussed above, does seem to have existed, it is hard to understand why Jesus and his disciples, who do not elsewhere appear as sharing sectarian views and practices, should have adopted the calendar of Qumran (particularly for a festival held in Jerusalem).²⁹

Observations on calendrical theories

While few, if any, of the theories listed above can actually be proved wrong, the reason for this is that they are characterized by a lack of any firm evidence by which they might be tested. With the exception of Jaubert's theory, even the calendrical divergence they propose is itself a matter of speculation, and all without exception depend on postulating a calendrical observance on the part of Jesus and his disciples for which the rest of the gospel tradition provides no foundation. Moreover, the very abundance of such theories suggests caution, since each can work only if all the others are wrong.

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But in addition to their speculative nature, one serious objection confronts all such theories. All of them suppose that it was possible and acceptable for one group of Jews, in Jerusalem, to celebrate the Passover on a different day from the official date. The killing of the lambs was restricted to the temple courts, and the temple was under the control of the Sadducean priesthood. Would they have allowed others whom they regarded as heterodox to come into the temple and carry out their rituals unhindered? And if such divergent observance of the festival had in fact taken place, is it likely that surviving Jewish literature would have preserved no record of it?

²⁸ A. Jaubert, *The Date of the Last Supper* (ET, New York, 1965).

²⁹ Among many responses to Jaubert's theory see Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, 24-25; J. Blinzler, *ZNW* 49 (1958) 238-251; G. Ogg, *NovT* 3 (1959) 149-160; A. Strobel, *ZNW* 51 (1960) 69-101; P. Benoit, *Jesus and the Gospel* 1 (ET, London, 1973) 87-93.

Solutions depending on a reinterpretation of the gospel accounts

If it is improbable that there were two different celebrations of the Passover, is it possible to eliminate the problem by suggesting that either John or the synoptic gospels has been misinterpreted, and that they are not in fact speaking of different calendar dates at all? Here there are obviously two possible routes, either to try to square John's statements with the supposed 'synoptic chronology' or to read the synoptics as in fact speaking, like John, of a Last Supper before the official Passover date.

Reinterpretation of John

The key verses are John 13:1; 18:28; 19:14. If these three statements could be interpreted in accordance with the 'synoptic chronology', all the rest could be accommodated. Two recent attempts to do so are by D. J. Moo³⁰ and D. A. Carson.³¹

John 13:1 apparently introduces the narrative of the Last Supper with the words 'before the feast of the Passover'. Carson proposes that these words refer not to the supper but to the foot-washing (though it is not clear how he separates the two chronologically in the light of 13:2, 'the evening meal was being served' (NIV); was this a different meal?) Moo, in common with others, takes the offending phrase as qualifying the contents of verse 1 (Jesus' knowledge and love), not the events which follow, so that 'the time of the actual meal is not indicated'.

John 19:14 is disposed of by taking *paraskeuē tou pascha* not in the sense of '(the day of) preparation for the Passover' (ie Passover eve), but rather of 'Preparation Day (=Friday, the day of preparation for the sabbath) in Passover week', a translation which NIV has adopted without comment, but which most commentators regard as a harmonizing expedient rather than a natural translation of the phrase.

John 18:28 is the most difficult to get around, as Moo recognizes (it 'remains problematic'). He and Carson propose that to 'eat the Passover' here does not mean to eat the Passover meal, which according

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to their interpretation had already been eaten the previous night, but 'referred to general festival meals, which occurred throughout Passover week... Although the evidence is slim, this alternative represents the most likely of the harmonization attempts.'³²

A glance at the majority of commentators on these verses will soon show that these reinterpretations, however cautiously presented, cannot claim to offer a natural understanding of the text, but are clearly motivated by the desire to harmonize. This in itself may not be fatal to the attempt to conform John to the supposed 'synoptic chronology', but it does give rise to the question whether this was the right choice to make as to which of the two accounts required reinterpretation. But there are two further factors which suggest that if either the 'synoptic' or the 'Johannine' chronology is to be reinterpreted to fit the other, it should be the Johannine which takes precedence.

³⁰ D. J. Moo, *The Old Testament in the Gospel Passion Narratives* (Sheffield, 1983) 321-323.

³¹ D. A. Carson, *Matthew* in F. E. Gaebelin (ed), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 8 (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984) 528-532.

³² Moo, *Old Testament*, 322 nl; cf Carson, *Matthew*, 531.

One factor is the bearing of external evidence. Such evidence as there is outside the gospels points towards Jesus' death on Nisan 14 rather than Nisan 15. While Paul's description of Jesus as 'our Passover sacrificed' (1 Cor. 5:7) does not demand a precise date, it would have added point if based on a reminiscence that Jesus was killed on Nisan 14 at the same time as the lambs in the temple. Rabbinic tradition remembered that 'Yeshu' was executed 'on the eve of the Passover',³³ and the second-century Gospel of Peter introduces its account of the crucifixion by saying that Pilate 'delivered him to the people on the day before the unleavened bread, their feast'.³⁴ Astronomical evidence also points in the same direction. While attempts to calculate the relation of calendar dates to days of the week in the early first century are not unanimous, there is general agreement that it is at least probable that Nisan 14 fell on a Friday (as the 'Johannine chronology' requires) in the years AD 30 and 33, while there is no date between AD 27 and 34 when Nisan 15 is likely to have fallen on a Friday. Some experts categorically deny that this was ever the case, in which case the 'synoptic chronology' is simply impossible.³⁵ Jeremias, the leading advocate for the 'synoptic' scheme, is able at most to claim that it is possible (though not probable) that Nisan 15 fell on a Friday in AD 31.³⁶ External evidence therefore decisively favours a 'Johannine' rather than a 'synoptic' chronology.

The other factor is the presence even in the synoptic gospels of several features which do not seem compatible with the day of Jesus' trial and crucifixion being Nisan 15, the first full day of the festival following on the slaughter of the lambs. These have been frequently listed and discussed.³⁷ Prominent among them is the observation that various actions of the priests and of other actors in the synoptic accounts seem to contravene the provisions of Jewish *halakah* for that day, at least as they were understood by the time of the compilation of the Mishnah.³⁸ Without here going into details, it may at least be argued that if the 'synoptic chronology' is adopted, it apparently involves

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violation of the sanctity of the feast day not only by the priests (who, it may reasonably be argued, were prepared to subordinate strict legality to the religious duty of getting rid of a false teacher) but also by ordinary Jews such as Simon of Cyrene, Joseph of Arimathaea, and the women who followed Jesus. Explanations have been offered for each of these suggested violations, but a theory which requires so many special explanations should be adopted only if there is no alternative approach which does not depend on this special pleading.

Reinterpretation of the synoptic accounts

In view of the formidable problems involved in attempting to fit the text of John into the supposed 'synoptic chronology', not to mention the problems which the synoptic narratives themselves pose for it, and in view of the clear bearing of external evidence (especially the evidence from astronomy) in favour of the 'Johannine chronology', it seems worthwhile to

³³ Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 43a; cf 67a.

³⁴ E. Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1 (ET, London, 1963) 184. For further evidence of patristic traditions favouring the 'Johannine' chronology see Ogg, *Chronology*, 237-242.

³⁵ So Finegan, *Handbook*, 292-296; G. Ogg in D. E. Nineham et al, *Historicity and Chronology in the New Testament* (London, 1965) 92-96.

³⁶ Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, 36-41.

³⁷ See Jeremias, *ibid* 62-84, for a full list, with arguments in reply. Also Marshall, *Last Supper*, 62-66.

³⁸ See especially Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, 74-79. Also Ogg, *Chronology*, 233-237; V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (London, 1952) 666-667; Marshall, *Last Supper*, 65-66.

ask whether it is so certain that the synoptic gospels do in fact date the Last Supper and the crucifixion a day later. Here there seem to be two main types of solution proposed.

The Last Supper not a Passover meal

It would help towards solving the problem if it could be argued that the Last Supper was not the Passover meal as such at all. In that case it could suitably be held at any time prior to the official Passover, as John's chronology demands. But in that case what sort of meal was it?

I. H. Marshall mentions (but does not accept) the possibility that it was merely 'a somewhat formal guest meal'.³⁹ More specifically, H. Lietzmann has identified it as a *haburah* meal, 'the Jewish meals, invested with religious solemnity, which might be held by a company of friends (*haburah*), whenever they felt the need'.⁴⁰ Others have argued that it was the *kiddush*, a ceremony held regularly in preparation for the sabbath.⁴¹

None of these proposals have been widely accepted. There are certain specific objections, eg that our evidence for *haburah* meals is only in connection with circumcision, marriage, burial or other such legal ceremonies, and that the *kiddush* was not a separate meal held a day in advance of the sabbath or festival for which it prepared.⁴² But even more decisive is the clear statement in the synoptic gospels that what they met to eat was the 'the Passover'. It seems clear that the synoptic evangelists understood the Last Supper to be a Passover meal. This is shown not only by explicit statements such as Mark 14:12, 14, 16; Luke 22:15, but also by the character of the meal itself. Jeremias⁴³ has worked out in detail the indications that it conformed to the pattern of a Passover meal, and while some of the fourteen points he makes do not demand this identification, their cumulative effect, when added to the explicit statements mentioned above, is impressive. Does this conclusion

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then preclude any attempt to interpret the synoptic accounts in accordance with the 'Johannine chronology'?

The Last Supper an anticipated Passover meal

Granted that the Last Supper was a Passover meal, is it possible that it was held a day before the official date not because of a divergent calendar but because Jesus, knowing that when the official time arrived he would be dead, deliberately held a 'Passover' with his disciples a day in advance, as a farewell meal? Support for this proposal may be found in Luke 22:15-16, 'I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you I shall not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' The wording of verse 16 (especially if, with the better textual witnesses, *ouketi* is omitted) suggests that it was an unfulfilled wish, in that he would not in fact eat the Passover (in the full sense) with them, but yet at the same time the 'earnest desire' would be sufficient motivation for Jesus to take the irregular step of an 'anticipated Passover', something necessarily less than the 'real thing', but yet in intention and in atmosphere as nearly as possible a Passover meal. The main thing lacking would of

³⁹ Marshall, *Last Supper*, 67-68.

⁴⁰ H. Lietzmann, *Mass and Lord's Supper* (ET, Leiden, 1979) 170-171. Cf the further explanation by R. D. Richardson in the same volume, 620-625.

⁴¹ So G. H. Box, F. Spitta, *et al.* Ogg, *Chronology*, 210-215, sets out this view, and offers a strong critique of it.

⁴² See Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, 26-31, for specific refutation of these theories.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 41-62.

course be the lamb, which could not be ritually slaughtered until the next day.⁴⁴ And it is a remarkable fact that none of the synoptic gospels, for all their Passover atmosphere, mentions that they had a lamb,⁴⁵ an omission which Jeremias clearly finds an embarrassment to his identification of the Last Supper as a full Passover meal.⁴⁶ This poignant combination of a Passover intention and atmosphere with the absence of the lamb which was the centre of the Passover ritual would fit well with the otherwise puzzling fact that strong arguments in detail can be presented from the synoptic accounts (quite apart from John) both for and against the paschal character of the Last Supper.⁴⁷ It would also allow us to believe, as John's chronology states, that the authorities carried out their declared intention according to Mark 14:2 to arrest Jesus 'not on the festival'.⁴⁸

The interpretation of the Last Supper as an 'anticipated Passover' has in fact been widely supported.⁴⁹ To the objection that this would have been illegal, and no exceptions to the law were permitted in this matter, R. H. Fuller appropriately replies, 'Jesus certainly did not hold himself to be bound by the prescriptions of the law in situations where the interests of the coming Kingdom were paramount. If he could dispense with the Sabbath law on occasion, why not also the passover law?'⁵⁰

But this interpretation has generally been offered on the assumption that in that case the synoptic gospels are mistaken in their placing of the supper, misled by its paschal character into treating it as a regular Passover meal at the official time. This, it is assumed, is what Mark 14:12 states, and therefore this view results not in a harmonization but rather in a simple preference of John to the synoptics. Thus Marshall⁵¹

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states categorically that 'the simple view that Jesus held a meal twenty four hours ahead of the official time founders on the explicit paschal chronology of the meal given in the synoptic Gospels', while Moo states that this view is 'impossible to reconcile with Mark 14:12'.⁵²

But what exactly does Mark 14:12 say? Does it present an 'explicit paschal chronology' which demands a meal at the official time? I do not think so. Moo is quite right to state that it 'explicitly mentions the slaughter of the Paschal lambs on the day that the Last Supper preparations were made'. But when did that 'day' begin and end? We have noted above that the Jewish day began at sunset. The killing of the lambs took place in the afternoon between about three and five pm,⁵³ while the Passover meal followed after dark.⁵⁴ The killing and the

⁴⁴ F. Godet, *The Gospel of St. Luke*, 2 (ET, Edinburgh, 1957) 285, 288-289, believes that they did have a lamb, because Jesus had 'the right to free Himself from the letter of the ordinance', and slaughtered it privately.

⁴⁵ C. K. Barrett, *JTS* 9 (1958) 305-307, has argued that 'to eat the Passover' actually means to eat the Passover lamb, so that Lk. 22:15 refers to 'this lamb here before me'.

⁴⁶ Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, 66-67.

⁴⁷ Arguments for, see Jeremias, *ibid*, 41-62; arguments against, *ibid*, 62-84.

⁴⁸ Jeremias, *ibid*, 72-73 escapes this difficulty by the proposal that *en tē heortē* means 'among the festival crowd', and so refers to place rather than to time.

⁴⁹ Eg Taylor, *Mark*, 664-667; R. H. Fuller, *The Mission and Achievement of Jesus* (London, 1954) 70-71; T. Preiss, *Life in Christ* (ET, London, 1954) 81-99; J. N. Sanders & B. A. Mastin, *The Gospel according to St. John* (London, 1968) 303-304; F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (London, 1969) 182-183; Benoit, *Jesus and the Gospel* 1, 92.

⁵⁰ Fuller, *Mission and Achievement*, 71.

⁵¹ Marshall, *Last Supper*, 74-75.

⁵² Moo, *Old Testament*, 321.

⁵³ Josephus, *War* 6, 423. See Finegan, *Handbook*, 286-287.

eating thus fell on different 'days' of the Jewish calendar. When therefore Mark 14:12 speaks of a meal held after dark on the same day when the lambs were killed, he *cannot* be speaking of the regular Passover meal, which was the next 'day', but must refer to the evening *before* the killing, which began the same Jewish 'day'. It is only our unfamiliarity with the Jewish method of day-reckoning which has led us to assume that he is speaking of the evening following the killing of the lambs.

So the theory of an 'anticipated Passover' does not entail that Mark has made a mistake in the way he describes the date in 14:12, but rather that his modern interpreters, familiar with the Roman method of day-reckoning, have misunderstood him. Taken within his own Jewish context, he is describing the same date which John also clearly presents for the Last Supper, that is the evening which began Nisan 14, 'the day on which (some fifteen to twenty hours later) they sacrificed the passover lamb'. The wording of the parallel statement in Luke is even clearer, for he describes it (Lk. 22:7) as 'the day of unleavened bread, when it was necessary (*edei*) to sacrifice the passover', a turn of phrase which suggests a ritual still to be carried out at the time in question, rather than one already performed. On this interpretation, all four gospels agree in indicating that Jesus died on Nisan 14, after a last meal with his disciples which was the nearest he could get to a proper 'Passover' in the circumstances.

It will by now be obvious that it is this last view, of an 'anticipated Passover' and of an interpretation of Mark 14:12 according to the regular Jewish method of day-reckoning, which I favour. (The accompanying chart sets out how I see the events described in the gospels as relating to the Jewish calendar.)

Naturally it too faces some objections from those who prefer to maintain the supposed (but I believe illusory) 'synoptic chronology'. These must be briefly discussed.

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| JEWISH CALENDAR | | MODERN DAY-RECKONING |
|---|--|------------------------|
| ----- Nisan 14 (Passover Eve) | <i>Sunset</i> LAST SUPPER <i>Midnight</i> <i>Noon</i> | Thursday |
| From c.3pm: KILLING OF PASSEVER LAMBS ----- | CRUCIFIXION <i>Sunset</i> | |
| Nisan 15 'OFFICIAL' PASSEVER MEAL | <i>Midnight</i> | ----- Friday |
| Sabbath | <i>Noon</i> | |
| ----- Nisan 16 | <i>Sunset</i> <i>Midnight</i> | ----- Sunday |
| | RESURRECTION | |

1. Can Nisan 14 be described as 'the first day of Unleavened Bread' (Mk. 14:12)?

⁵⁴ Most meals were held during daylight, but the Passover was a specific and regular exception to this, and could not be held before dark, in fulfilment of Ex. 12:8, 'that night'.

Strictly speaking Nisan 14 was the Passover day, while the feast of unleavened bread followed on Nisan 15-21. It should be noted first that this problem is not peculiar to the interpretation I am proposing. On any understanding of Mark 14:12 it must cover at least part of Nisan 14, for that was the date of the killing of the lambs. But in any case it is not a real problem, as there is plenty of evidence that the two festivals were popularly treated as one, and Nisan 14 thus regarded as the first day of the total festival. Josephus refers to Nisan 14 as 'the day of unleavened bread',⁵⁵ and the Mishnah shows that leaven began to be removed from houses on the evening which began Nisan 14.⁵⁶

2. How late is 'late'?

What Mark 14:12 refers to is the preparation of the supper. If he is precise in dating this on Nisan 14, and therefore after sunset, the meal itself cannot have begun until some time later. Yet Mark 14:17 is usually translated, 'When it was evening he came with the twelve', and the meal began. In that case surely the preparations must have begun well before sunset. But the phrase in Mark 14:17 is *opsias genomenēs*, literally 'when it was late'. This phrase is used of a variety of different times of

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evening. Sometimes it is not clear precisely what time the phrase indicates, but on at least one occasion it refers to a time before sunset (Mk. 15:42), in other places to a time shortly after the day's work finished at sunset (Mt. 20:8; Mk. 1:32; cf also Mt. 16:2 in the longer text, 'the sky is red'), and in another to a time which must have been well into the night. This last is Mark 6:47/Matthew 14:23, which is part of a long sequence of events which began when it was already late according to Mark 6:35 (*hōras pollēs genomenēs*; Matthew actually has *opsias de genomenēs* at this point as well), after which Jesus fed the 5,000, the remains of the meal were cleared away, he sent away the disciples, dismissed the crowd, and went off into the hills to pray. After all that, the time can still be described as *opsias genomenēs*! From this it seems clear that the phrase is not a precise indication of time, and that on one other occasion it allows a sequence of events after the late afternoon which must have taken at least as long as the preparation of the supper.

3. How long did it take to prepare the meal?

Later Mishnaic regulations indicate an elaborate preparation for the Passover, much more time-consuming than for an ordinary meal.⁵⁷ To begin such preparations after sunset, it is suggested, would be too late. But, quite apart from the fact that the meal itself may have begun well into the night (see previous section), we should note that this was not a normal Passover meal, but a hurried anticipation, that there was no lamb, which would considerably reduce the time of preparation, and that the room itself was already prepared (Mk. 14:15).

4. Could such a meal be called a 'Passover'?

Quite apart from being held on the wrong day, is it not true that a Passover meal without a Passover lamb is 'inconceivable'?⁵⁸ But what sort of Passover meal was held even at that time by Jews who were unable to go to Jerusalem, at which alone the lamb could properly be sacrificed? Their option was presumably either to have a Passover meal without a lamb or to

⁵⁵ Josephus, *War*, 5, 99. See further R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: a Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1982) 524.

⁵⁶ Mishnah, *Pesahim* 1:1-3.

⁵⁷ Mishnah, *Pesahim*, passim.

⁵⁸ Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, 82.

have no Passover meal at all. As I. H. Marshall says, 'Although there is some evidence for the slaughter of paschal lambs outside Jerusalem before AD 70, it seems probable on the whole that, if the Passover was celebrated away from Jerusalem, there was no slaughter of a paschal lamb and a meal of unleavened bread had to suffice.'⁵⁹ And after the destruction of the temple in AD 70 it is clear that a lambless Passover meal, far from being 'inconceivable', became the norm.⁶⁰ It is therefore quite likely that in the special circumstances of his impending death Jesus should hold such a meal. Conforming in all practicable ways to the familiar Passover ritual, and held in the atmosphere of the Passover festival, it is quite reasonable that both he and the evangelists should describe it as 'the Passover', for such it was in

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intention. (We find no difficulty in describing as a 'birthday party' a ceremony held for practical reasons a day or more in advance of the 'official' date, even if it necessarily lacks some of the presents etc which will follow at the proper time!)

5. Is this the 'natural meaning' of Mark 14:12?

This is for most people the fundamental objection to my proposal. But the proper question for New Testament exegesis is not what is the 'natural' meaning for us in our modern western culture, but what would have been the natural meaning for a reader who shared Mark's familiarity with the Jewish understanding of 'day'. I would go so far as to argue that such a reader, if he understood Mark 14:12 to be speaking of the evening, could only have taken it in the sense I am proposing, since the evening following the killing of the lambs was not the same day. I wonder, too, whether Luke's *edei* (Lk. 22:7) is perhaps a modification of the wording in the light of his own Gentile background, and that of at least some of his readers, to prevent them thinking, as most modern interpreters of Mark do, that he was speaking of the killing as already past at the time indicated.

Such, then, is my 'solution' to the problem of harmonizing the accounts of the Last Supper. The synoptic gospels, like John, are describing a 'Passover' meal held a day in advance of the official date, since by the time that date arrived Jesus would no longer be there to fulfil his 'earnest desire' to eat a last Passover with them. At many points this interpretation coincides with others, but taken as a whole I am not aware that it has been argued since A. Plummer hinted at a solution along these lines in his commentary on Luke nearly a century ago!⁶¹

CONCLUSION

It is time to return to our original question. What effect will it have on our approach to issues of chronological harmonization if we come at it by attempting to ascertain the authors' intention in the way they have presented their narratives?

We have considered three different examples of apparent chronological discrepancy between the gospels, and I have suggested that a consideration of the authors' intention will lead to different types of solution in each case.

⁵⁹ Marshall, *Last Supper*, 68.

⁶⁰ G. F. Moore, *Judaism* (Harvard University Press, 1927) 2, 40-41.

⁶¹ A. Plummer, *The Gospel according to St. Luke* (ICC, Edinburgh, 1898) 491-492.

In the first case (the fig-tree) it seems clear that either Matthew or Mark (or conceivably both) has deliberately restructured his narrative of the events of a period of one or two days in order to allow the theological significance of the events to stand out more sharply. Each evangelist has a different moral to draw out of the story of the fig-tree, and the different structuring of the narrative of this limited sequence of

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events, resulting in a 'chronological discrepancy', is an appropriate way to communicate this. An appropriate 'harmonization' in this case is not to try to unscramble the narrative structure of either (or both) of the evangelists, but to recognize that for at least one of them exact chronological sequence was not the intended structural principle of the narrative. In that case, there is no 'discrepancy' to be explained, once the author's intention has been noted.

In the second case (the temple incident) a more drastic 'restructuring' is involved. But here again I have argued that the placing of the incident in John's gospel is governed not by the time when it occurred but by its place in John's composite presentation of the messianic significance of Jesus. In other words, he records it at the beginning not because it happened early in Jesus' ministry but because it serves to set the scene for the reader's understanding of the following account of the relations of Jesus with 'the Jews'. In the case of the synoptic gospels, however, the incident seems to fit as an integral part of the sequence of events leading up to Jesus' arrest and execution, and I see no reason to doubt that they intend us to see it in that chronological setting. Again, a 'discrepancy' is created here only by the assumption that John's gospel is intended to be read as a chronological sequence throughout, an assumption which I believe is open to question.

It might seem, then, that to be consistent I should invoke the same principle in the third case, that of the Last Supper where, after all, a mere twenty-four hour difference is in question. Why should I not argue that either John or the synoptic writers has in this case also slightly 'restructured' the course of events in order to draw out their theological significance? In the case of John this might be in order to bring out the sacrificial significance of Jesus' death by locating it at the time when the Passover lambs were being killed; in the case of the synoptics to emphasize the Passover significance of the Last Supper by 'postponing' it to the actual time of the official Passover meal. Each of these options is adopted by a good number of commentators. Why then have I felt it necessary to argue at tedious length for a chronological harmonization which few will agree with in all its details, when I could so easily have waved here again the magic wand of 'non-chronological narration', and by so doing have remained in the respectable company of the majority of commentators?

The answer is quite simply that I do not believe that in this case either John or the synoptic writers were indifferent to chronology. Each makes explicit chronological statements. I do not doubt that there is a theological flavour to their concern to relate the gospel events to the Passover season with all its soteriological overtones. But did that theological interest necessitate the precise tying up of the Last Supper and its sequel with the details of the Passover observance which both John and the synoptics in their different ways have attempted? It does

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not seem so to me, and so I have no option but to join the many others who, in mutually contradictory ways, have attempted to harmonize their statements. Our solutions vary widely, but we are united in the conviction that here is an apparent discrepancy which would not have been a matter of indifference to any of the evangelists.

These examples illustrate the danger of any simple blanket approach to chronological harmonization. A proper sensitivity to the literary style and purpose of the authors will not allow us either to force all apparently chronological statements artificially into a uniform sequence or to dismiss all chronological matters as such as of no importance. It is for us to attempt to discern how the writers intended their narratives to be understood, and to interpret them accordingly. Where it seems that they did intend to inform their readers on the chronological sequence of events, then a serious attempt to harmonize their accounts is the proper response of anyone who believes that their writings are canonical scripture, and are given to us to teach truth. But this proper concern should not be extended to trying to solve 'problems' which arise only through a misunderstanding of their intention.

It will be quite fairly objected that the writer's intention is not accessible to us, and that my view of how John intended a given narrative to be understood is just that, my view. It carries no independent authority. It does not arise from any privileged access to the mind of John. It is, therefore, purely subjective, and anyone else has the right to set it aside with a mere 'I don't agree'. That is perfectly true. I do not subscribe to the so-called 'intentionalist fallacy' of believing that there is some way of knowing an author's intention other than by reading what he wrote with due attention to the context in which he wrote it. I am not proposing anything more than that. But I am suggesting that some approaches to harmonization, both from the right wing and from the left, have been guilty of not doing even that—'reading what the author wrote with due attention to the context in which he wrote it'.

There is no guarantee of success in the attempt to understand the text as the author intended (including the interpretations I have proposed above!) and there will always be plenty of room for disagreement. But the fact that there is no easy access to the author's intention does not mean that it should not be sought. A question is not shown to be illegitimate by the recognition that it is not easy to answer!

So, to return to where I began, while I applaud Childs' desire to take seriously the question of gospel harmony, I do not believe that his 'canonical' approach does full justice to the texts, if it results in a lack of interest in questions (such as, in some cases, chronology) which were of interest to the authors themselves.

But having registered that protest, I fully agree with his desire to let each of the evangelists speak in his own individual way, by noticing and

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learning from the differences as well as the agreements. My concern for 'harmony', even in matters of chronology, does not mean that I regret the fact that the Christian canon has four different gospels rather than a single authorized biography. Indeed I am glad that 'harmony' has become the traditional term for this issue, for it seems to me to sum up the canonical situation admirably. 'Harmony' is what is created when a number of voices sing their own different parts at the same time. It is not the same as unison, where all sing the same notes. Because the voices are different there is a greater richness than in unison, but because they

R.T. France, "Chronological Aspects of 'Gospel Harmony'," *Vox Evangelica* 16 (1986): 33-60.

sing together under the direction of a single composer, what we hear is not a collection of discordant notes, but a richly satisfying harmony.

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