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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE FOUR GOSPELS

UNIT 13: THE LAST SUPPER

The Last Supper is one of the most profound and meaningful events recorded in the gospels. The term is actually not a biblical one, but is commonly used of the final meal that Jesus participated in with his disciples before his arrest, trial and crucifixion. All the gospels include accounts of this meal, but the details given in the Synoptic Gospels appear to differ from those given in the Gospel of John. In this unit we will look at the apparent disagreement and see how the gospels actually agree and what they teach.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The Synoptic Gospels present the Last Supper as a Jewish Passover meal (see Note 1) that occurred the evening before the crucifixion (Matthew 26:17; Mark 14:12; Luke 22:15). But John's Gospel tells us that the morning after the Last Supper, when the Jewish leaders brought Jesus to Pilate (see Note 2), they did not enter the governor's palace "because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover" (John 18:28). A few verses later he tells us that the day on which Jesus was crucified "was the day of Preparation of the Passover" (John 19:14, 31). This would mean that Jesus died before the Passover meal was eaten at sundown – so the Last Supper could not have been a Passover meal. Therefore, John's account of the Last Supper would seem to contradict the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This has been called the most difficult problem in the New Testament, but a number of solutions to the problem have been proposed, and we will look at them here.

1. A Different Meal. Some try to avoid the problem by claiming the Last Supper was not a Passover, but some other type of meal. This is scripturally impossible, however, as the disciples asked Jesus, "Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?" (Matthew 26:17) and the Synoptic Gospels repeatedly state that it was a Passover meal (Matthew 26:17–19; Mark 14:1, 12, 14, 16; Luke 22:1, 7–8, 13, 15). As we will see, the details of the Last Supper show it was indeed a Passover meal.

2. Uncertainty Regarding the Correct Day. Each year the day of the Passover was determined through calculation and the reports of witnesses who had seen the new moon at the beginning of the month in which the festival would occur. Sometimes the testimony of the witnesses was uncertain, however, and the Jewish religious authorities could declare two consecutive new moons and thus a second day for celebrating the festival. Nothing is said in any of the gospels regarding this, however, so it seems unlikely.

3. Different Calendars. Several Jewish groups followed different calendars (for example, the Qumran community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls celebrated the Passover a day before most Jews). Some scholars have suggested that Jesus and his disciples also celebrated the Passover a day early, thus without a lamb slaughtered in the temple which would not be available till the following day. This view is very possible. There is some indication that the Galileans may have celebrated the Passover a day earlier than the Judean Jews. The Pharisees seem to have celebrated the Passover after the sunset at the beginning

of the decreed day (that is, after sundown the day before), while the Sadducees waited until after sunset at the end of the decreed day. Thus, Jesus could have celebrated the Passover early – according to the Pharisaic calendar – which would agree with the Synoptics. But the apostle John could have been referring to the Passover as kept by the priestly Sadducees who are the ones involved in the verses in question.

4. Meaning of the Day of Preparation. There is some question regarding whether John’s mention of the “day of Preparation” (John 19:14, 31) means “preparation for the Passover” or “preparation for the Sabbath” (also a common use of the term). The Greek word that John used, *paraskene*, “day of preparation,” is the word that was commonly used for Friday, because Friday was always the day of preparation for the Sabbath. So, if John meant the “Friday of Passover week” – preparation for the Sabbath – there would be no contradiction between what he says and what the Synoptics record.

5. “Passover” Meaning the Whole Festival. “Passover” was often used broadly for the whole Feast of Unleavened Bread which immediately followed it. There is both biblical and extra-biblical evidence for this. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus uses the Greek word *pascha* “Passover” to refer to the entire Feast of Unleavened Bread (see Note 3). More importantly, the Gospel of Luke uses the same word to refer to the entire feast: “the Festival of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching” (Luke 22:1).

6. The Chagigah Offering. Part of the overall Spring festival was the offering of two important peace offerings, called the *Chagigah* – one on the day of the Passover and one on the following day, on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. No one who was defiled could offer the Chagigah, so John 18:28 may simply be indicating that the Jewish religious leaders were concerned that they would not be able to make this required offering on the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread.

So, there are multiple possibilities to explain why there need be no contradiction between the Synoptic accounts of the Last Supper and that of John. They are given above in a generally ascending order of likelihood. Of the options considered, the first three are certainly possible (though, as stated, the first is highly unlikely) and the final three or four are completely possible, so we may conclude that there is no reason to presume contradiction in the gospel accounts when there are so many potential reasons to account for the differences in those accounts. We may accept that the Last Supper was conducted at the time of the Passover meal – as the Synoptics claim and as John’s Gospel need not in any way dispute.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

We can better understand the accounts of the Last Supper when we view what the gospels tell us about this event within the framework of the Passover service that the Jewish people have kept since their exodus from Egypt. Although the number and order of all the parts of the service as conducted in recent times may not be identical with how it was celebrated in the first century, the parallels between the main elements of the Jewish Passover and the events of the Last Supper are clear. Here we will look at some of those parts of the traditional Passover and how they are reflected in the Last Supper.

1. The First Cup of Wine. The Passover begins with drinking a small cup of wine (the first of four). This is exactly how we are told the Last Supper began: “When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, ‘I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.’ After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, ‘Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes’” (Luke 22:14–18).

2. Washing of Hands. After the first cup of wine, the host passes a basin of water for the washing of hands symbolizing the need to be spiritually clean to participate in the fellowship of the Feast. “The evening meal was in progress, and ... Jesus ... got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him” (John 13:2–5). Note the washing took place *after* the Passover had begun and the first cup of wine had been drunk.

3. The Maggid. Hebrew for “Telling the story,” Maggid is the main storytelling portion of the Passover, the section in which the story of the exodus from Egypt is narrated (Exodus 12:25–27), along with description of the various ritual items of the event and their meanings, and poems regarding thankfulness for various aspects of the relationship of the people of God with God. The Gospel of John contains a long section (chapters 14–17) in which Jesus, rather than looking back to the exodus event, spoke about himself as the “True Vine” and his relationship to his disciples, and what would happen after his death.

4. The Second Cup of Wine. This was traditionally associated with the Ten Plagues of Egypt that were part of Israel’s exodus deliverance. It is not specifically mentioned or precluded in the Last Supper accounts.

5. Eating of Bitter Herbs. This represented the Israelites’ suffering and tears in Egypt. Like the second cup of wine, it is not mentioned, but not precluded in the gospel accounts of the Last Supper. These aspects of the meal are contained in the gospels’ expressions such as “while they were eating” (Matthew 26:21,26; Mark 14:22; etc.)

6. The Sop of Bread. The host takes a piece of bread, dips it, and gives one to each guest in turn beginning with the guest of honor. “‘It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.’ Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot” (John 13:26).

7. Eating of the Lamb. The lamb that had been sacrificed for the event was, naturally, the main dish of the Passover meal. The gospels do not mention a lamb being prepared or eaten at the Last Supper, but that may be because Jesus was the sacrificial Lamb to whom the physical lamb pointed (John 1:29).

8. Breaking and Eating of the Unleavened Bread. Unleavened bread was eaten with the lamb that had been sacrificed. Since the destruction of the temple in AD 70, the Jewish people have substituted the eating of the bread (*matzah*) for the sacrificed lamb. At the Last Supper, Jesus utilized the unleavened bread to symbolize his body as the Lamb of God. “And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me’” (Luke 22:19).

9. The Third Cup of Wine. This cup is traditionally called the “Cup of Blessing” or “Cup of Salvation.” We see this in the Last Supper: “In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you’” (Luke 22:20).

10. Singing of Selected Psalms. One or more psalms were sung, to conclude the Passover, usually from Psalms 115-118. In the gospel account we read “When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (Matthew 26:30).

11. The Fourth Cup of Wine. After the conclusion of the main part of the Passover, a fourth cup of wine was poured (see Note 4). Luke tells us, “Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. On reaching the place, he said to them, ‘Pray that you will not fall into temptation.’ He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, ‘Father, if you are willing, take *this cup* from me; yet not my will, but yours be done’” (Luke 22:39–42, emphasis added). We will see how this cup enters the story in Unit 14 of this course.

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So, all the main parts of the Passover meal can be seen in the combined gospel accounts of the Last Supper. And there are other ways in which the gospels reflect the Passover. For example, *maot chitim* (“money for wheat”) was traditionally given to the poor at this time to enable them to purchase items for the Passover Feast. This explains the way in which the other disciples understood Jesus’ instruction to Judas: “Jesus told him, ‘What you are about to do, do quickly.’ But no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the festival, or to give something to the poor” (John 13:27–29).

CONCEPTS AND APPLICATIONS:

Scripture clearly presents Jesus as the Lamb of God who is the spiritual Passover Lamb (John 1:29, 36; 1 Corinthians 5:7), but how we see him symbolically fulfilling that role depends on our understanding of which days the Last Supper and crucifixion occurred. If the Last Supper occurred – as the Synoptic Gospels affirm – at the time of the Passover meal, then according to our way of dividing the days Jesus was sacrificed the day after the Passover lambs were sacrificed and the Passover meal eaten. However, biblically, a new day started at sundown (Mark 1:32; etc.), so from a biblical perspective the Last Supper and the crucifixion both occurred on the same day, the Feast of Passover.

If the Last Supper occurred on the day before the Passover – as it is often presumed that John claims – then Jesus was crucified at the time the Passover lambs were being sacrificed. While this may seem symbolically fitting, we have seen that this understanding of John’s account is not necessary, and that all the gospels point to the Last Supper as being a Passover meal held the evening after the Passover lambs were sacrificed. But we must remember that the Passover lambs were not the only lambs sacrificed on the Passover! When we think of the “sacrificial lamb,” most of us may think of the Passover, but every day in the temple, in the morning and early evening, the priests sacrificed a lamb for the Tamid offering (from the Hebrew *tamid* “continual” – see Exodus 29:38–43; Numbers 28:1–8). Josephus tells us that the Tamid sacrifices were offered in the morning and in the afternoon “about the ninth hour” (3:00 pm) every day (see Note 5). All three Synoptic Gospels stress that Jesus died at about the ninth hour (Matthew 27:46–50; Mark 15:33–37; Luke 23:44–46), so this means that whatever day the Last Supper was held, and the crucifixion occurred, Jesus died at exactly the time of the daily sacrifice of the sacrificial lamb, and within hours of the sacrifice of the Passover lamb.

The Additional Information Given in John

The Gospel of John is key to understanding much of the meaning and application of the Last Supper. While on the surface John gives fewer details about the actual meal, his gospel actually explains a number of aspects of the event more than any of the others. This is especially true regarding the Maggid – the story-telling or discourse portion of the meal in which the account of the first Passover and the exodus was retold. The Synoptic Gospels record very little of this, but John’s Gospel tells us a great deal. The long discourse given by Jesus during the Last Supper as recorded in John 13–17 clearly fulfilled the role of the Maggid, though it is quite different in content. This is because Jesus moved the focus from the Passover lamb to himself as the true Passover sacrifice, and from the exodus of God’s “firstborn” people setting out for the promised land to his personal exodus (see Note 6) as he began the journey to his Father in Heaven.

But in addition to predicting his suffering and death for our salvation, Jesus also used the Last Supper to imbue the Passover with new meaning, to institute the new covenant, and to establish an ordinance for his church in his use of the bread and the wine of the Passover meal. Luke and the other Synoptic Gospels record Jesus' words in this regard:

And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." (Luke 22:19–20)

While he does not include them, John's Gospel enhances our understanding of these words. John shows that Jesus' words regarding the symbolism he was investing in the unleavened bread and the wine echoed what he had previously said after he miraculously fed the 5,000:

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life ... I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. Just as ... I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me." (John 6:35, 51–57)

Just as Nicodemus had earlier tried to interpret Jesus' words literally about being born again, so the Jews – and even Jesus' disciples – had difficulty with his words about eating his body and drinking his blood because they were viewing them literally. As a result, Jesus had to explain that his statement was intended to be understood spiritually: "Jesus said to them, 'Does this offend you? ...The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing'" (John 6:61, 63). It is not the physical eating and drinking that gives eternal life, but accepting and having faith in the sacrifice of the Son of God. So, although John's Gospel does not include a description of Jesus breaking the bread and giving it to his disciples at the Last Supper, nevertheless his description of the feeding of the 5,000 explains its significance in detail (see Note 7).

Likewise, although in the other gospels Jesus speaks about the new covenant in his blood shed for the remission of sins (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20), John alone gives the new commandment that is fundamental to that new covenant: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34).

It is hard to imagine how much less we would know and understand of these concepts if it were not for John's account of the Last Supper and the material that illuminates it. In the same way, how much less encouragement we would have. While the Synoptic Gospels record Jesus' words that he would go ahead of them, after his resurrection, and meet them in Galilee (Mark 14:28), John alone records that Jesus stated "if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:3). Just as important, John alone records Jesus' promise:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you ... All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." (John 14:16–18, 25–26)

As a final example of the additional material that John's Gospel gives us, John alone recounts how, during the Last Supper, Jesus taught the principles of humility and true servanthood as he washed his disciples' feet. John records both Jesus' performance of this act and his instructions to his disciples: "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:14–15). Without John's account we would not have been given the opportunity to participate in this profound expression of humble service.

Of course, all the gospel accounts are important, and combined they show us that when we participate in the Lord's Supper, eating the bread and drinking the wine as Jesus instructed, we are not only remembering his sacrifice, but also showing our belief in Jesus' death for our sins, in his resurrection and return, and the sending of the Holy Spirit to be his presence with us. As we keep the Lord's Supper and celebrate it as a true memorial of what the Last Supper signified, we remember, encounter, and are one with Jesus Christ.

* Note 1: Passover was an especially holy festival for the Jewish people that commemorated the time when God spared them from the plague of physical death and brought them out of slavery in Egypt (Exodus 11:1–13:16).

* Note 2: John 18:28 tells us that the Jews took Jesus to Pilate in the "early morning." Roman officials began meeting the public at daybreak (the "sixth hour" according to the Roman legal calendar) and finished by noon. There is no doubt that the religious leaders, who controlled Judea for the Romans, would be able to obtain an audience with the governor at very short notice (especially as the charge they were bringing was one of sedition against Rome).

* Note 3: Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XIV, 2.1 [65].

* Note 4: Today, the fourth cup is often not drunk, but left for the "Elijah who is to come."

* Note 5: Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XIV,4.3 [65].

* Note 6: As we saw in Unit 11– in Luke's account, when he tells us: "They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem" (Luke 9:31), the word "departure" is the Greek word *exodos* ("exodus").

* Note 7: John's description of the feeding of the 5,000 actually contains some of the same words ("Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated" – John 6:11) that Luke records of the Last Supper: "And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them" (Luke 22:19).

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

Summarize in a single paragraph why what the Synoptic Gospels say about Jesus' final Passover meal need not be seen as contradicting the account of the Last Supper found in John's Gospel.

Beneath the Surface:

In what ways do the major parts of the Jewish Passover meal help you better understand the Lord's Supper?

Everyday Applications:

In addition to the lessons of humility and servanthood seen in Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet, what other lessons can we learn and apply from other things Jesus said or did at the Last Supper?