

# The Last Week of Jesus Christ

by Wayne Spencer

Based on book by Colin J. Humphreys, *The Mystery of the Last Supper* (2011) and other study

Questions this relates to:

1. How is it that Jesus was crucified on Friday, he rose on Sunday, and the New Testament says he was dead “three days and three nights?” (See Matthew 12:40)
2. Was the Last Supper a Passover meal, and was it done at the same time most Jews in Jerusalem celebrated the Passover?
3. How can the four gospels be reconciled about the events of the last week, in terms of the when the Last Supper took place, when Passover was, and when the crucifixion took place?
4. How was the day and date of the Passover determined in the time of Jesus?
5. What was the actual date and day of the week of the crucifixion?
6. What calendar systems were in use in Israel in the time of Christ?

Some of the above questions may seem to be unrelated to the questions about the last week of Christ. But there are threads that do tie them together. Unraveling these questions involves Bible study, history, and even astronomy. Bible scholars have had different opinions over the years over the issue of which day of the week was Jesus crucified on, for example. Christian scholars who accept the inerrancy of the New Testament come up with different views on this kind of question because they opt for different views of details of the last week. Colin Humphreys is a professor of Materials Science at Cambridge University, UK. He has looked into the puzzle of the last week of Jesus from a new light. The new light brought to it is mainly considering calendar systems in relation to Old and New Testament history. Examining all the biblical and historical data on this leads Humphreys to the following conclusions about Jesus last week. This is the best way of resolving all the questions that I know of. It gives a means of answering all the questions without compromising on the issue of the inerrancy of the New Testament.

- The Last Supper in which Jesus ate with his disciples before his arrest, was on Wednesday evening, two days before the official day of the Passover as celebrated by most Jews.
- The gospel of John in the New Testament assumes a different calendar than Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This explains how they can be reconciled regarding the last week events.
- Jesus went to multiple trials (six or seven). The first was apparently a sort of interrogation by Annas done about 3:00 to 4:00 AM early Thursday morning. The second was before Caiaphas, around 5:00 AM Thursday morning (prior to the main trial). The third was before the entire Sanhedrin beginning about 5:45 or 6:00 AM, after sunrise, on Thursday morning. The fourth was Friday morning after sunrise by the Sanhedrin again. This was a short trial to confirm the death verdict. Jesus’ appearing before Pilate and Herod were both after this on Friday morning.
- Jesus was taken to be crucified Friday morning and he dies about 3:00 PM that afternoon. This date was April 1, 33 AD by the Gregorian calendar we use today.

### Scriptures Related to these Issues

God's calendar command to Moses in Egypt **Exodus 12:1-2, 5-8, 14-20**

[What kind of calendar did Moses use at time of the Exodus?]

David fights Amalekites to return stolen property; implies sunrise day reckoning **1 Samuel 30:17**

Instructions about eating the Passover lamb on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the month Exodus 12:3-11

Passover date is Nisan 14 in Exodus and in Ezekiel, like the original pre-exilic calendar

Passover date is Nisan 15 in Leviticus and Numbers (scribal change?) Lev. 23:5 and Numbers 28:16

The Last Supper was "before Passover." John 11:55 and **13:1**; Mark 14:1

Jesus refers to the Last Supper as a Passover meal. **Luke 22:7-8, 15**

Jesus and the disciples enter Jerusalem; finding the man with a water jar. **Mark 14:12**

[How can the Feast of Unleavened Bread begin on the same day as when the lamb is killed?]

The Last Supper and Jesus' trials were over prior to Passover. **John 18:28** and John 19:14

Jesus was taken first to Annas, father-in-law of Caiaphas. John 18:12-13.

[Why was Jesus taken first to Annas? See also Luke 3:2]

Jesus' arrest, Peter's denials, Jesus before Pilate & Herod. Matthew 26:47-27:26, Mark 14:43-15:15

Luke 22:47-23:25, John 18:1-40

Time of Jesus death on the cross. Matthew 27:46

The sky darkens during the crucifixion. Matthew 27:45; Luke 23:44

The day of the crucifixion was a "Preparation day" before Passover. **Mark 15:42**

The day after the crucifixion was a "special Sabbath," a sort of double Sabbath **John 19:31**

Earthquake at the death of Jesus, holy people raised from death, temple curtain Matt. 27:51-53

Jesus refers to his death by using Jonah as an analog. **Matthew 12:40** (also Jonah 1:17)

New Testament verses indicating Jesus rose the third day after the crucifixion

Matthew 27:64; Luke 24:7; Acts 10:40; 1 Corinthians 15:4;

### Historical Date of the Crucifixion

A possible range of years of the crucifixion can be arrived at by considering historical information on when the reign of Tiberius Caesar was, when Caiaphas was High Priest, and when Pilate was governor of Judea. All three men are mentioned in various historical records. Roman historian Tacitus wrote that Christ was executed during the reign of Tiberius under Pontius Pilate. (Tacitus died about 120 A.D.) Tiberius was in power from 14 A.D. to 37 A.D. Caiaphas was High Priest from about A.D. 18 to 36. Pilate was governor from A.D. 26 to 37. Therefore, Jesus crucifixion must have been between 26 A.D. and 36 A.D.

This range of possible years of the crucifixion can be narrowed down by a variety of considerations. First, we must come to an answer on what day of the week the crucifixion fell on. If this can be determined to be Friday, some of the above years can be ruled out because the Passover (Nissan 14 or 15 in the Jewish calendar) would not fall on a Friday. Astronomical calculation can determine when Passover would have occurred by calculating when the New Moon fell during the month and when the Moon first became visible after New Moon. Mark 15:42 and John 19:31, which mention the crucifixion being on Preparation Day and that the next day was a special Sabbath implies a Friday crucifixion. From astronomical calculation, including the problems of the visibility of the Moon, the above range of years reduces to three possibilities. These are the cases where Nisan 14 falls on a Friday. Only in April of the years 27, 30, and 33 A.D. does the Passover day of Nisan 14 fall on a Friday. There are possibilities from the uncertainties on the exact visibility of the Moon that could put the New Moon on Nisan 15 in A.D. 27, or A.D. 34. However, the 27 A.D. dates can be ruled out because of the important verse of Luke 3:1-3 which firmly fixes the time of the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry. This had to be A.D. 28 or 29. This means A.D. 27 is too early to possibly be the year of the crucifixion. The 34 A.D. dates can also be ruled out because they would move events related to the Apostle Paul's life and the beginning of the church too late. Paul's conversion was apparently before 34 A.D. If Jesus' crucifixion was in the Spring of 34 A.D. it does not leave time for Paul's conversion at the time to agree with various information about Paul's life. One other consideration can rule out the year of A.D. 30. According to Humphreys, the Gospels mention *three* different Passovers during Jesus' ministry prior to the crucifixion. The third of these Passovers would have to be after A.D. 30, so A.D. 30 is too early for the crucifixion. The 30 A.D. date would not leave enough time for Jesus' ministry. This leaves 33 A.D. as the only remaining possible year of the crucifixion.

### Roman Sources on the Crucifixion

Following is a portion of two articles from creationanswers.net on historical Roman sources that refer to Christ's crucifixion.

From "Why Believe the Bible, Part 3"

<http://creationanswers.net/biblical/whybible3.htm>

There were Roman, Jewish, and Christian historians who wrote about the crucifixion. Some even mention the earthquake and darkening of the sky that is described in the gospels at the crucifixion

(see Matthew 27:45-54; Luke 23:44-45). See for example this article by John MacArthur which mentions Tertulian pointing out to Romans that their own records record the darkening of the sky at the crucifixion [<http://www.jesuschristonly.com/sermons/macarthur/the-centurion-jesus.html>].

Though the historical evidence for the darkening sky is tantalizing it's not clear what was actually recorded about it in the Roman records, which have been lost. At least we can say many Romans had heard of it in some manner. This does not necessarily mean it was a global darkness. Scripture doesn't say how widespread the darkness was. There may also be evidence of the crucifixion earthquake. The National Geophysical Data Center, a database kept by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) records that only one earthquake is known to have taken place near Israel between 25 and 35 A.D. and it was in 33 AD.

A Christian historian named Sextus Julius Africanus (from second century), quoted a Roman historian, Phlegon, about the crucifixion: "*Phlegon records that, in the time of Tiberius Caesar, at full moon, there was a full eclipse of the sun from the sixth hour to the ninth - manifestly that one of which we speak. But what has an eclipse in common with an earthquake, the rending rocks, and the resurrection of the dead, and so great a perturbation throughout the universe? . . . And calculation makes out that the period of 70 weeks, as noted in Daniel, is completed at this time.*" (Julius Africanus, Chronography, 18.1)

Julius Africanus goes on to explain why this darkness is so significant: "*On the whole world there pressed a most fearful darkness; and the rocks were rent by an earthquake, and many places in Judea and other districts were thrown down. This darkness Thallus, in the 263 third book of his History, calls, as appears to me without reason, an eclipse of the sun. For the Hebrews celebrate the passover on the 14th day according to the moon, and the passion of our Savior falls on the day before the passover; but an eclipse of the sun takes place only when the moon comes under the sun. And it cannot happen at any other time but in the interval between the first day of the new moon and the last of the old, that is, at their junction: how then should an eclipse be supposed to happen when the moon is almost diametrically opposite the sun?*" (Julius Africanus, Chronography, 18.1)

From article, "The Date of Christ's Crucifixion"

<http://creationanswers.net/biblical/crucifixiondate.htm>

Jerome (4th century) is quoting Phlegon's 13th book which is a translation of a historical chronicle on the 202nd Olympiad by Eusebius. Eusebius' records of the Olympics were considered authoritative but were lost, though they are translated and preserved some in the writings of others. "*In the fourth year, however, of Olympiad 202, an eclipse of the sun happened, greater and more excellent than any that had happened before it; at the sixth hour, day turned into dark night, so that the stars were seen in the sky, and an earthquake in Bithynia toppled many buildings of the city of Nicaea.*" (Jerome) [from <http://www.neverthirsty.org/pp/historical-secular-quotes-about-jesus/phlegon.html> ]

## Calendars, Day Measurement, and the Last Week

In modern times we have the long-standing practice of following a well agreed upon calendar. But throughout history a number of different calendars have been used by different nations and cultures. Calendars have been modified through history also. But the consideration of calendars has not been considered very much in Biblical studies, at least not by many. Today we use the Gregorian Calendar, which was established by Pope Gregory the XIII in 1582. The Gregorian calendar was devised to make a correction (of about 11 minutes) to the Julian Calendar that would keep Easter from moving through seasons over time. The Julian calendar was instituted by Julius Ceasar in 45 B.C. Calendars make a difference in Biblical studies for several reasons, one of which is that there were multiple calendars in use in Israel at the time of Christ. Understanding this can help understand the events of Jesus' last week, especially regarding the times of the Last Supper, Jesus' trials, and the crucifixion.

In Egypt Moses was given instructions by God to make a particular month the beginning of the calendar year for the Jews (see Exodus 12:1). That month would also commemorate the Passover, in which the plague of the firstborn went through Egypt but the angel passed over Jews homes having blood on the doorposts. Colin Humphreys assumes this was a simple modification of an existing lunar calendar in Egypt that was used for Egyptian religious events. The Egyptians developed a "solar" calendar system where they determined the length of the year by watching the position of the star Sirius in the sky (they called it Sothis). This gave them a year that was 365 days long. Their agriculture and national events were governed by this solar calendar but many religious events followed a lunar calendar. There were two lunar calendars in Egypt but the basic idea was to make it with 30 day months but add days at the end of the year. However, in certain years an entire extra month was sometimes added to the year. They Egyptians considered the day to begin at sunrise.

By the time of Christ, the Jews had an official calendar and system where days were considered to begin at sunset and months were either 29 or 30 days long. The name of the first month of the Jewish year was called Nisan. How did the Jews come to get this type of calendar? It was due to the Babylonian exile. Both the Assyrians and the Babylonians followed a Babylonian lunar calendar. That calendar alternated the lengths of the months as 29 and 30 days, they added days at the end of the year, and days were considered to begin at sunset. The month name "Nisan" is a shortened form of the Babylonian month name "Nisanu." This same month is sometimes also called Abib by the Jews. It corresponds approximately in our modern calendar to from mid-March to mid-April. Lunar calendars in most cultures usually considered the day to begin at sunset because this was when the Moon for a new month first became visible. The Moon is last visible in the morning at the end of the old month and it is first visible in the evening in the new month, with a period in between averaging about 60 hours in which the Moon is not visible. Thus, months were considered to begin based on when the Moon became visible or based on when it became invisible. This is the idea of "New Moon." Some cultures would define the New Moon as the middle of the period when the Moon is not visible. This is essentially like today's definition of New Moon. It is what astronomers would call "conjunction." The Moon is not visible when it is roughly lined up with the Sun. But, the

Jews had a somewhat different practice of defining the New Moon as the time when the Moon first became visible again after being invisible. When the Moon first became visible, there were Jews given the task of watching this in the sky and reporting to the Sanhedrin. Then the beginning of the new month was announced to Israel by lighting signal fires or sending runners throughout the land. In the month of Nisan when the month begins was important because the Passover was determined to be either on the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> day of Nisan, at the time of the Full Moon.

Recall that not all Jews went to Babylon in the exile. The Assyrian exile happened prior to the Babylonian exile and both exiles left some Jews in Israel. Other Jews left Israel on their own, some going to Egypt for example. There were a few groups of Jews in Israel by the time of Christ that believed in trying to follow a calendar for Passover that was like what Moses originally followed in Egypt. They did not want to follow the Babylonian-style calendar that was adopted by exiled Jews. However, no one was sure how to determine this “pre-exilic” or “Mosaic” calendar. The Samaritans were a group who tried to follow this “Mosaic” like calendar. The Essenes were another Jewish sect that tried to follow this pre-exilic calendar. This meant two important differences that affect how they celebrated Passover week activities. First in the Mosaic calendar, they counted the day to begin at sunrise. This made it possible for the killing of the lamb to be on the same calendar day as the Passover meal (Mark 14:12). Second, they considered the month of Nisan to begin while the Moon was invisible, not at its first visibility. This makes Passover a day earlier for the Mosaic calendar. This means that Nisan day 14 by the Mosaic calendar was Wednesday in 33 A.D. in the last week but Nisan 14 was Thursday of that week by the official Jewish calendar. Thus the Samaritans and Essenes would have had their Passover meal and begun the Feast of Unleavened Bread a day earlier than others in Israel.

If this scheme is correct, it means Jesus was following the timing like Moses in having the Last Supper as a Passover meal. But Jesus death took place at the same time that the Jewish priests were sacrificing the Passover lambs at the temple! Humphreys emphasizes that Jesus was making himself like the new Moses to the Jews. He was also following practices similar to the Essenes, likely meeting in one of their homes. In this way Jesus was able to have the Passover/Last Supper meal before his arrest. This also allowed Wednesday night, Thursday daylight hours, Thursday night, and Friday morning all before he was placed on the cross. This allows ample time for the normal Jewish legal practices, according to Colin Humphreys.

## Jesus' Trials

Some facts about Jewish trials, based on the Mishnah, according to Colin Humphreys.

- Capital cases had to be tried in the daytime and the verdict had to be reached in the daytime.
- In capital cases, a verdict could never be finalized on the same day as the main trial. The "court" had to reconvene the following day to confirm the verdict.
- Trials could not be held on the Sabbath or the eve of a Sabbath
- Trials could not be held on a Feast Day or the eve of a Feast Day

Thus, if Jesus trials were on Thursday night and Friday morning, clearly these practices could not have been followed. Or, is there another possibility that allows time for this process?

## Possible Trial Timeline from C. Humphreys

Wednesday night, between midnight and 2:00 AM Last Supper ends, disciples go to Gethsemane.

Jesus arrested and taken to Annas about 3:00 AM (not official trial). Peter's denials about this time.

Jesus questioned by Annas, then Jesus sent to Caiaphas before sunrise

After sunrise Thursday, entire Sanhedrin and other Jewish leaders meet for the official trial (Luke 22:66).

Many false witnesses speak against Jesus to the Sanhedrin

Sometime Thursday, a death verdict is reached and Jesus is handed over to the Roman guards

Thursday night, Jesus kept in prison

Friday morning, daybreak – Sanhedrin confirms the death verdict and sends Jesus to Pilate

Pilate sends Jesus to Herod, then Herod sends him back to Pilate. Death warrant signed.

(Pilate's wife finds out about Jesus going to Pilate sometime Thursday and then has her dream early that night before daybreak Friday, Matt. 27:19.)

Friday morning before 9 AM, Jesus flogged

Friday about 9 AM Jesus crucified. He dies about 3 PM. Dark sky from 3 to 6 PM.

[Note: Mark 15:25 puts the crucifixion "at the third hour" (see NASB) but John 19:14 puts Jesus before Pilate "at the sixth hour." This may be because John counts the hours of the day in the Roman manner, starting from midnight as we do today, whereas Mark could be counting the hours from sunrise as the Jews did.]