

Why did Jesus die at Easter time?

We all know that Jesus died at Easter time, but why just then?

In the gospels there are incidents when the people or the leaders tried to kill Jesus. The earliest event was the one Matthew tells about in chapter 2v13-18 when Herod tried to kill Jesus as a baby in Bethlehem. Luke in 4v28-30 tells that when Jesus visited his home village in the early days of his ministry his own neighbors tried to throw him off the top of a cliff.

²⁸All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. ³⁰But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

Herod Antipas, the son of Herod wanted to kill him and so did the Jewish leaders on several occasions. Yet every time Jesus escaped.

Finally we come to Easter time, or as the Jews called it, Passover. That was the one time we are told that the Jewish leaders did not want to kill him, Matthew 26v3-5.

³Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, ⁴and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. ⁵“But not during the Feast,” they said, “or there may be a riot among the people.”

Yet Jesus forced them to do it exactly at that time. He told Judas Iscariot to go and betray him just on the evening when Jesus and his disciples were celebrating the Passover. This is one of the events missing from the Synoptic Gospels, which John wants to make sure we know about so he records it in John 13v27,30.

²⁷As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. “What you are about to do, do quickly,” Jesus told him, ³⁰As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.

Have you realized how carefully Jesus calculated the timing?

First of all he kept secret the place where he and the disciples would have the meal. Mark 14v13-17.

¹³So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. ¹⁴Say to the owner of the house he enters, ‘The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ ¹⁵He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.” ¹⁷When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve.

He had made a secret arrangement with someone and gave the code sign of a man carrying a jar of water, which no man would normally do in that culture. He sent two disciples to follow the man but he kept the rest of the disciples including Judas with him until they arrived at the secret destination. Then when he did send Judas out, Jesus and the disciples left the house before Judas and the soldiers could get there, according to Mark 14v26: ²⁶*When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*

That gave him the time to complete his instructions to the disciples and have his prayer time with his Father.

When Judas and the soldiers finally arrived at the house Jesus was long gone. The young boy Mark, who later wrote Marks Gospel, was the son of the owner of the house where Jesus and the disciples met for the Passover meal. He saw the soldiers and ran ahead to warn Jesus and the disciples but found everyone asleep but Jesus. Mark watched what happened not daring to interrupt Jesus' prayer. Without Mark's eyewitness account we would never have known what Jesus prayed because the disciples were asleep. Finally Judas and the soldiers came and arrested Jesus just at the time Jesus intended. Mark escaped leaving his sheet behind in the hands of a soldier who tried to capture him, Mark 14v51,52

⁵¹*A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, ⁵²he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.*

So Jesus intended to die at Passover and despite all attempts to kill him beforehand but to avoid doing it exactly at the feast, it happened exactly at Passover. Why?

To find the answer to this question we need to go back to the Old Testament to Leviticus 23.

⁴*“These are the LORD's appointed feasts, the sacred assemblies you are to proclaim at their appointed times:*

There we read that God gave the people of Israel seven yearly feasts. These seven feasts were divided into three groups comprising three feasts, one feast and three feasts, a bit like the order of the lampstands on the Menorah in the temple.

The Passover and Unleavened Bread

⁵*The LORD's Passover begins at twilight on the fourteenth day of the first month.*
⁶*On the fifteenth day of that month the LORD's Feast of Unleavened Bread begins;*

Firstfruits

bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest. ¹¹He is to wave the sheaf before the LORD so it will be accepted on your behalf; the priest is to wave it on the day after the Sabbath.

The first group of three comprised:

Passover - a single meal prepared on the afternoon 14th of Nisan and eaten after sunset, which in the Jewish way of reckoning the day meant the beginning of the 15th Nisan.

Unleavened bread – a period of seven days beginning with the Passover meal on 15th Nisan but sometimes extended to refer to the day time of the 14th Nisan when the houses were cleaned of all leaven.

Firstfruits – a sacrifice made to God of the first of the grain from the barley harvest. This occurred in some Jewish systems on the first day after the Shabbat in the week of Unleavened Bread, i.e. on the Sunday morning of what we would call Easter week i.e. Easter Sunday (though these days it is the second day in the week of Unleavened Bread).

Nisan occurs somewhere around March or April in our calendar. It is the first month in the Jewish calendar.

Feast of Weeks

¹⁵ “*From the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, count off seven full weeks.* ¹⁶ *Count off fifty days up to the day after the seventh Sabbath, and then present an offering of new grain to the LORD.*”

The second group was a single day of celebration, which occurred fifty days after the firstfruits celebration and is thus again a Sunday (in the first system mentioned above, though for modern Jews it can occur on other days of the week because they follow the second system). This is what we now call **Pentecost** but the Jews call Shavu’ot. This is a celebration of the beginning of the wheat harvest.

The third group of three feasts begins on the first day of the seventh month in the Jewish calendar. These three feasts occur in September or October. They are:

Feast of Trumpets

²³ *The LORD said to Moses,* ²⁴ “*Say to the Israelites: ‘On the first day of the seventh month you are to have a day of rest, a sacred assembly commemorated with trumpet blasts.*”

Trumpets – this lasts for one day and occurs on the first day of the seventh month and on this day trumpets are blown. Really it is rams horns or what the Jews call the shofar. This feast is called Rosh Ha’shanah in Hebrew, which means: Head of the Year. It is the first day of the New Year in the calendar of Israel (even though it is not the first month but the seventh, which is a bit confusing. This makes us wonder what God’s purpose is in making the New Year start at the beginning of the seventh month).

Day of Atonement

²⁶ *The LORD said to Moses,* ²⁷ “*The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves, and present an offering made to the LORD by fire.* ²⁸ *Do no work on that day, because it is the Day of Atonement, when atonement is made for you before the LORD your God. From the evening of the ninth day of the month until the following evening you are to observe your sabbath.*”

On the tenth day of the same month there is the only real fast commanded for the Jewish people. This day is the Day of Atonement in Hebrew: Yom Kippur. On this day Jews neither eat nor drink from sunset to sunset. They repent of their sins and pray for God's mercy in the coming year.

Feast of Tabernacles

³³The LORD said to Moses, ³⁴“Say to the Israelites: ‘On the fifteenth day of the seventh month the LORD’s Feast of Tabernacles begins, and it lasts for seven days. ³⁵The first day is a sacred assembly; do no regular work. ³⁶For seven days present offerings made to the LORD by fire, and on the eighth day hold a sacred assembly and present an offering made to the LORD by fire. It is the closing assembly; do no regular work.

The final feast begins on the 15th day of the same month and is the harvest festival celebration. It lasts eight days with a special celebration on the first and eighth days. During this time Jews live in simply constructed huts with semi-open roofs so that they can see the stars through them. Each of these buildings is called a succa in Hebrew and the plural is Succot, which is the name of the feast. They are remembering the time of wandering in the desert when they had no proper homes to live in. They are also celebrating the harvest God has given them. On the eighth day the Jews now have a marriage ceremony when they commit themselves to read the books of Moses, the Torah, for another year. This tradition is not specifically commanded in the Bible, only that the eighth day is special.

So of these seven feasts, three are linked to agricultural events: firstfruits of the barley harvest, first wheat harvest, and the completion of the final harvest and thus there is some logic to their timing in the calendar. Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread are linked to the historical event of when the Israelis left from Egypt. They sacrificed a lamb on the afternoon of 14th Nisan, painted its blood over the doorposts and then roasted and ate it with unleavened bread that same evening, the beginning of the 15th Nisan. During the night they had to leave Egypt after the firstborn of the Egyptians were killed. Fifty days later after crossing the Red Sea they reached Mt Sinai where God appeared to them. This corresponds to the timing of the feast of Shavu’ot. Thus today the Jews celebrate it as the time when the law was given.

The remaining two feasts, the blowing of trumpets and the Day of Atonement have no obvious connection to agricultural calendar or the history of Israel so there must be some reason God had for why he chose those dates.

Jesus died during Passover and the Feast of Unleavened bread. He rose again on the first Sunday after the Shabbat in the Feast of Unleavened bread, the day we call Easter Sunday but the Jews called Firstfruits. Fifty days later, exactly at Pentecost, Shavu’ot, when the Jews celebrate the giving of the Law, the Holy Spirit came and wrote God’s law, not on stone tablets but human hearts. This is surely not a coincidence?

All my professional life I have been working with translators. I have been writing in English and then my writings have been translated into many European languages as well as Chinese and Japanese. In order to be a good translator you not only have to know the words in both languages but you have to know the context that gives

meaning to those words. These days this process is called Localization. Normally a translator translates from a foreign language into their mother language because they understand the meaning best in that language.

According to John, God expressed himself in his Word. *“In the beginning was the Word...”* John 1v1. But in order to make sure that this Word was properly understood, it was necessary for God to give mankind a context. This is one of the main roles of the Old Testament and especially the Laws of Moses. Not only does it tell how God wanted his people to live but it also gives a context to help everyone to understand God’s Word, Jesus, when he came. If Jesus had just come to Greeks with all their gods or to Hindus with their beliefs in many incarnations of god, no one would have understood him properly. But by coming to the people of Israel who have been prepared for 2000 years from the time of Abraham, there was no way they could misunderstand him. Jesus was not killed because the Jews misunderstood him but because they understood him too well and did not like what they heard.

By preserving the Old Testament, the Jews have enabled even non-Jews like us to be able to learn to understand Jesus properly.

When the Devil failed to stop Jesus dying at Passover and rising at Firstfruits, he did the next best thing and made sure the church separated its observance of Easter from the Jewish calendar. There was a big debate in the third century between Christians who wanted to continue to synchronize their observance of Easter with the Jewish timing of the Passover and the Church leaders who wanted to do their own calculations. In the council of Nicea it was decided the Church would decide its own date and the Church began to force all Christians to stop relying on Jews to determine the date of Easter.

So should we start observing the Passover customs of the Jews today? Well, you can do if you like but notice two points first of all. The way Jews celebrate today is based on rabbinic tradition, which is not necessarily based on the Bible and cannot be exactly as in Jesus’ time because there is no temple in which to offer sacrifices. I have found there are many wonderful insights we can get from the way the Jews celebrate Passover now but we must remember that as Christians we are under no obligation to adopt any Jewish customs. Paul was very clear on that issue as he told in Galatians 5v2-4

²Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. ⁴You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

Some Christians these days have fallen into the error of claiming that to be a good Christian you must adopt Jewish customs. This is wrong and dangerous because it is the beginning of the slippery slope to legalism.

The other extreme is to ignore the Jewish customs and the Bible teaching and just focus on Christian traditions. This is also wrong because we then miss out on the teaching God wanted to give us through the Old Testament to help us understand

better his Word, Jesus. The Biblical feasts are like windows into God's purpose and if we ignore them, then we will be blind to much of his purpose.

So if Passover, Unleavened Bread and Firstfruits are windows to help us understand the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus, what do they tell us?

In this talk I will focus on Passover and Unleavened Bread and then on Easter morning we will learn about Firstfruits.

For the Jewish people, Passover is the remembrance of the night God protected them from the angel of destruction because of the blood of an innocent lamb. Everyone whose house had the mark of the blood on it was passed over by the angel of death. We deserve death because of our sins but if we will take shelter under the blood of Jesus the Lamb of God, which has been shed for us, we will be untouched by the eternal death we deserve and even the death of our physical bodies will be temporary and it will be reversed when we get our new bodies.

The lamb that was to be slain was to be taken into the house of the family on the 10th Nisan and then slain on the 14th. During these four days it was to be investigated to make sure it was perfect. On Palm Sunday Jesus came to Jerusalem for four days of intense investigation. That is what the events of Easter week are all about in the gospels. Finally the religious leaders gave up questioning Jesus because he passed all their tests and thus qualified to be the Passover lamb.

As a result of the events of Passover the people of Israel were set free from hundreds of years of terrible slavery. As a result of the death of Jesus, any one who believes in him is set free from their slavery to sin and to the devil and moves out into a new life beginning with baptism (symbolized by the passage through the Red Sea) and then receiving the Holy Spirit whose coming was signified by the events of Pentecost.

The Holy Communion we celebrate comes from the Passover meal or Seder as it is called in Hebrew. During that meal four cups of wine are drunk: the cup of sanctification, the cup of instruction, the cup of redemption and the cup of praise. After the meal and before the third cup, the cup of redemption some of the unleavened bread is broken and shared. Then the third cup is drunk. These are the two elements to which Jesus gave a new significance as his body and blood.

In rabbinic tradition there are three pieces of unleavened bread called Matzo and the middle one is broken and part hidden before the Passover meal. The hidden part is then brought out from its covering and eaten at the end of the meal. Many Messianic believers consider that the three pieces of bread represent the Father, Son and Spirit and the middle one that is broken and hidden represents the death and burial of Jesus. The finding and eating of this part, called Afikoman, which comes from a Greek word meaning "that which comes after" i.e. the dessert, symbolizes the resurrection of Jesus. In rabbinic tradition the afikoman symbolizes the Passover Lamb, which does not exist anymore because there is no temple in which the sacrifice can happen. Thus in Christian eyes the modern version of the Passover meal has additional elements in it, which point even more clearly to Christ even if the rabbis who developed the liturgy did not believe in him themselves.

After eating the afikoman, the cup of redemption is drunk. This is our communion cup, when we remember that Jesus died to redeem us from our sins. So we see that by understanding the Passover meal we get deeper insight into the Holy Communion. The early church then brought that significance into their regular meals together. Instead of it remaining a yearly celebration it became a weekly or in the Jerusalem church a daily celebration of the salvation our Lord has given us.

What about the matzo, the Unleavened Bread? Leaven is often a symbol of sin. Unleavened Bread symbolizes a life free from the contamination of sin. This is the sort of life we should live as a result of being saved by our Passover Lamb. This is what Paul wrote to the Corinthians: 1 Cor. 5v6-8

⁶Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? ⁷Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.

This passage shows Paul's understanding of how Christians should celebrate the Jewish feasts. We should incorporate the truths of the feasts into our Christian life and belief.

So why did Jesus die exactly at Passover? It is because Passover, Unleavened Bread and Firstfruits are God's window into the meaning of the events of Easter: the last supper, the death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus and the need to have sin removed from our lives. These feasts are God's context to help us understand his Word correctly. The more we come to understand the meaning of these feasts, the better we will understand God's purpose. And just as these three feasts and that of Pentecost have been fulfilled to the exact day by the death and resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit, so I believe the autumn feasts will have their fulfillment in God's timetable. I have written a book that deals with this subject and this will be published in Finnish this summer time then we can look more at this subject!

Let me leave you with one unresolved question: which day did Jesus die?

The Synoptic Gospels of Matthew Mark and Luke clearly tell that Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples. The preparations were made on the day the lambs were to be slain e.g. Mark 14v12.

¹²On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

In contrast John's gospel tells that the meal was before the Passover Feast 13v1,2.

¹It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. ²The evening meal was being served,

In 13v29 John tells that the disciples thought Judas had gone out to buy something for the feast, which would have been impossible if the feast was occurring because no shops would have been open because everyone would have been eating the Passover and anyway it was a holy day.

²⁹Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the Feast, or to give something to the poor.

All the events of the arrest, trial and execution of Jesus occurred during the Holy Day at the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which goes against the Laws of Moses.

²⁸Then the Jews led Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness the Jews did not enter the palace; they wanted to be able to eat the Passover.

John18v28 tells that the Jews wanted to eat the Passover, so they did not come into the palace of Pilate.

¹⁴It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week, about the sixth hour. ³¹Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath.

Twice John tells in 19v14 and 31 Jesus died on the Day of Preparation of the Passover Week, not the first day of that week. He also tells in 19v31 that the next day was to be a special Sabbath, which is exactly what it would be if it was the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It was then followed by a normal Sabbath.

The Synoptic Gospels tell what Jesus did on Palm Sunday, Monday and Tuesday but they tell nothing about Wednesday. This would make sense if the Last Supper was on Wednesday. The traditional view that puts the Last Supper on Thursday means leaves us wondering why no mention is made of what Jesus did on Wednesday.

³³At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. ³⁴And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ³⁷With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

Jesus died a about 3 o'clock in the afternoon according to Mark 15v33,34,37, which is when the lambs would have been slain if it was the 14th of Nissan.

If Palm Sunday when Jesus entered Jerusalem and the temple was the 10th Nisan then he should have died on Thursday 14th Nisan and risen three days and three nights later on Sunday morning. In the traditional view he was only in the grave for parts of two nights and three days.

All of this implies two different traditions, one followed by the Galileans Jesus belonged to and the other the people of Judea and Jerusalem. We know that the Essenes of the Dead Sea Scrolls community did follow a different calendar but they would have had the Passover meal on the Tuesday evening, instead of Wednesday as John implies and Thursday as Christian tradition teaches.

Scholars are still looking for an answer to this question. So we must wait and see if one day a discovery is made, which will resolve this issue, or is the traditional answer correct? Let's see!

However, none of this changes the fact that Jesus died as part of the Passover events. He made sure his death happened exactly then to help us to understand the meaning of that death and resurrection. He wanted us to understand and to believe and to receive the salvation he offered. So let us celebrate Easter with that understanding and let us learn to live in the reality of this message.

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