THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

'Dating the Death of Jesus'

Citation for published version:
Bond, H 2013, ''Dating the Death of Jesus': Memory and the Religious Imagination', *New Testament Studies*, vol. 59, no. 04, pp. 461-475. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688513000131

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1017/S0028688513000131

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
New Testament Studies

Publisher Rights Statement:
© Helen Bond, 2013. Bond, H. (2013). 'Dating the Death of Jesus': Memory and the Religious Imagination. New Testament Studies, 59(04), 461-475doi: 10.1017/S0028688513000131

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 20. Apr. 2024

Dating the Death of Jesus: Memory and the Religious Imagination

Helen K. Bond
School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh, Mound Place, Edinburgh, EH1 2LX
h.bond@ed.ac.uk

After discussing the scholarly preference for dating Jesus' crucifixion to 7th April 30 CE, this article argues that the precise date can no longer be recovered. All we can claim with any degree of historical certainty is that Jesus died some time around Passover (perhaps a week or so before the feast) between 29 and 34 CE. The emergence of the Johannine tradition (in which Jesus died on the day of Preparation) and the Markan tradition (in which Jesus dies on the Passover itself) are explored through the lens of social/collective memory.

Keywords: date, crucifixion, Passover, social memory, paschal lamb, eucharist.

> 'There is a relatively widespread consensus that Jesus was crucified on April 7, 30.' J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 312.
>
> 'Jesus was dead by the evening of Friday, April 7, 30.' J. P. Meier, *Jesus: A Marginal Jew* (New York/London: Doubleday, 1991), 402
>
> 'As regards Jesus, it is certain that he was crucified in Jerusalem on 7 April 30 CE.' J. Murphy O'Connor, *Jesus and Paul: Parallel Lives* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2007), 53.
>
> 'the fourteenth of Nisan (7 April of the year AD 30) is, apparently in the opinion of the majority of contemporary scholars as well, far and away the most likely date of the crucifixion of Jesus.' R. Reisner, *Paul's Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 58.
>
> 'Thus, I conclude that Jesus died on Nisan 14 (April 7) in A.D. 30.' B. Witherington, *New Testament History: A Narrative Account* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 134.

As these quotations illustrate, the 7th April 30 CE is widely regarded by many modern Jesus scholars as the day on which Jesus died.[1] Of course, not everybody agrees with this view. Some favour the year 30 without specifying the precise day or month,[2] others propose more idiosyncratic dates,[3] and a sizeable minority of largely

[1] For a survey of older literature, which similarly favoured 7th April 30 CE, see J. Blinzler, *The Trial of Jesus* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1959), 72-80.
[2] So G. Theissen and A. Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (London: SCM, 1998), 160; E. P. Sanders accepts 30 as a useful approximation, but makes it quite clear that specific dates are impossible (and not really useful); more broadly he seems to prefer something in the range of 29-30, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993), 54, 282-90.
[3] For example, J. Vardaman argues for Friday Nisan 15, 21 CE ('Jesus' Life: A New Chronology' in J. Vardaman and E. M. Yamauchi [eds.], *Chronos, Kairos, Christos: Nativity and Chronological Studies Presented to Jack Finegan* [Eisenbrauns, 1989], 55-82); L. Depuydt argues for 29 ('The Date of the Death of Jesus of Nazareth,' *JAOS* 122 [2002], 466-80); as does D. J. Lasker ('The Date of the Death

conservative scholars favour 33.[4] Given the complexities of our sources, however, the level of agreement surrounding the date of Jesus' crucifixion is truly astounding. What I want to do in this paper is (1) to ask how scholars got to the 7th April 30 CE in the first place, (2) to look at the implications of this date, and (3) to suggest that scholarly confidence in it is severely misplaced.

I Why 7th April 30 CE?

All attempts to date Jesus' death begin with the gospel passion narratives. As is well known, the Synoptic and Johannine accounts have both similarities and contradictions. Both agree on the general sequence of events: that Jesus ate a meal with his disciples on a Thursday evening, that he was crucified the following day and quickly buried before the approaching Sabbath, and that the tomb was found to be empty on the Sunday morning. The major chronological discrepancy between the two accounts lies in the precise way in which events map onto the Passover. In Mark, both Jesus' last meal and his death take place on the feast day itself, while in John both events take place on the day of Preparation (Jn 19.14, 18.28, 19.31).[5] Thus both traditions agree that Jesus was crucified on the Friday and buried that afternoon, the question revolves around whether that Friday was the Passover itself, Nisan 15 (so Mark), or the day of Preparation, Nisan 14 (so John).

One approach to this problem is to harmonise the two traditions, to suggest that John and the Synoptics simply used different calendars. Perhaps the most famous exponent of this method was Annie Jaubert who, in a series of studies from the 1950s, famously suggested that Jesus and his disciples followed not the by now dominant Babylonian lunar calendar, but an old solar calendar evident in the books of *Enoch* and *Jubilees* and used at Qumran.[6] More recently, Colin Humphreys argued that Jesus and his disciples used a pre-exilic lunar calendar which, he claims, was still used by Galileans.[7] All attempts at harmonising the two traditions, however, are beset by the same four problems:

---

of Jesus: Further Reconsiderations,' *JAOS* 124 [2004], 95-99); and N. Kokkinos suggests Friday Nisan 14, 36 ('Crucifixion in AD 36: The Keystone for Dating the Birth of Jesus,' in J. Vardaman E. M. Yamauchi [eds.], *Chronos, Kairos, Christos*, 133-64).

[4] When combined with Lk 3.1-2, this date allows for the longer, Johannine reckoning of a two or even three year ministry. See for example, J. K. Fotheringham, 'The Evidence of Astronony and Technical Chronology for the Date of the Crucifixion,' *JTS* 35 (1934), 146-62; H. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 65-114; J. Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology: Principles of Time Reckoning in the Ancient World and Problems of Chronology in the Bible* (rev. edn. Massachussetts: Hendrickson, 1998), 353-369; P. Barnett, *The Birth of Christianity: The First Twenty Years* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 24-25, who admits that 33 is a 'minority view'; and C. J. Humphreys, *The Mystery of the Last Supper: Reconstructing the Final Days of Jesus* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011). R. E. Brown declares himself unable to decide between 30 and 33, *The Death of the Messiah* (New York/London: Doubleday, 1994), 1376.

[5] The Passover in John's scheme fell on the Sabbath that year, making the day following the crucifixion a particularly 'high day' (19.31).

[6] A. Jaubert, 'La date de la derniere Cène,' *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 146 (1954), 140-73; also *La date de la Cène – Calendrier Biblique et Liturgie Chrétienne* (Etudes Bibliques, Paris, 1957).

[7] C. J. Humphreys, *Mystery of the Last Supper*, 110-50. This ancient calendar, he argues, calculated the new month not from the visibility of the new crescent (as the Babylonian calendar did) but from the day of conjunction, and hence started its new days at sunrise.

- First, there is little evidence for any widespread use of alternative calendars in first century Palestine. In a thorough overview of the much-fêted Qumran calendar, Jonathan Ben-Dov and Sephane Saulnier show that recent scholarship has concluded that the calendar was neither strictly lunar nor solar, but rather composed of a rigid 364 day year.[8] The fact that this calendar made no provision for intercalations is problematic, and, as Sasha Stern points out, prolonged use over an extended period of time would have quite substantially severed the link between agricultural festivals and the cycle of the crops. In all probability, he suggests, schematic calendars such as that at Qumran (and also those of *1Enoch* 72-82 and *Jubilees*) served not as living calendars, but as idealistic or theoretical models related to a future world order. In Stern's view, calendrical sectarianism had ceased by the first century.[9]

- Second, Jesus' teaching shows no interest in the calendar, and both Jesus and his early followers in Acts appear to have visited the Temple at exactly the same time as other Jews. If they routinely used a different calendar, it is strange that it does not show up elsewhere in the tradition.[10]

- Third, if Jesus had celebrated the Passover according to a different calendar, it seems very odd that one of his followers (usually thought to be John) blatantly dated the last events in his master's life not by his preferred system of reckoning, but by that used by his chief priestly opponents.

- Finally, one further difficulty with the theories of Jaubert and Humphreys in particular is that by their reckoning the Last Supper was celebrated on either a Tuesday (so Jaubert) or a Wednesday (so Humphreys). Yet we have already seen that one of the few things that the Synoptic and the Johannine traditions agree on is that Jesus' last meal took place on a Thursday. By attempting to solve one discrepancy, these reconstructions have created another.

More plausible, perhaps, is the suggestion that the discrepancy lies in a difference in dating between Palestine and the Diaspora. Since the Passover was calculated following the sighting of the new moon (as we shall see below), and since there does not seem to have been a centralised body to endorse one particular calendar at this point (at least as far as we know), diversity could have existed amongst various Jewish groups.[11] It is *possible* that Jews in Palestine observed Passover on Saturday that particular year, and that those in certain areas of the Diaspora may have celebrated it on Friday. In view of this, M. H. Shepherd suggested that John followed the testimony of Christians in touch with priestly circles in Judaea, while Mark followed traditions endorsed by his own Roman church.[12] The difficulty with such a hypothesis, however, is that we would imagine that anyone making the journey to Jerusalem would automatically follow the Judaean calendar, celebrating the feast with

[8] See J. Ben-Dov and S. Saulnier, 'Qumran Calendars: A Survey of Scholarship 1980-2007,' *CBR* 7 (2008), 124-68.
[9] S. Stern, *Calendar and Community: A History of the Jewish Calendar 2nd Century BCE – 10th Century CE* (Oxford: OUP, 2001).
[10] This point is also made by G. Theissen and A. Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 160.
[11] S. Stern, *Calendar and Community*, 116-9.
[12] M. H. Shepherd, 'Are Both the Synoptics and John Correct about the Date of Jesus' Death?' *JBL* 80 (1961), 123-32.

the rest of the city. All traditions and recollections of events would simply follow the Jerusalemite dating. It is difficult to see why they would be transposed onto a calendar used by Roman Jews, particularly if the differences were simply to do with observation rather than sectarian debates.

Faced with these significant difficulties, most scholars accept that we simply have to choose between the two options. But which one - John or the Synoptics? Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, recent scholars have tended to give preference to John.[13] At first sight, John's scheme has two great advantages over that of the Synoptics: first, John's account is internally consistent while Mark's (as we shall see in a moment) is riddled with difficulties. Second, John's low-key account of Jesus' informal Jewish hearing on the day of Preparation chimes much more harmoniously with what we know of Jewish jurisprudence in the first century than the Synoptic record of a grand meeting of a Sanhedrin convening a capital case on the very night of Passover.[14]

Thus, by a significant modern consensus, the date of Jesus' death was 14th Nisan, and the task of the historian is to work out on what years the 14th Nisan fell on a Friday and then to convert it to the Julian calendar to give a date which is meaningful to us. The timescale can be narrowed quite considerably: if we accept the historicity of Luke 3.1 (which dates the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry to 28 at the earliest) and balance against this the need to fit in Pauline chronology, Jesus' death must have taken place some time between 29 and 34 CE.[15] The question then becomes more straight-forward: are there any years between these margins when the day of Preparation fell on a Friday?

There are two ways of solving this puzzle: while an earlier generation of scholars relied on ancient calendrical tables,[16] modern scholars have the benefit of computers. Whichever method is employed, however, astronomers can pinpoint the *beginning* of the months in the first century by locating the lunar conjunction (when the moon is between the earth and the sun) and then, by adding two weeks, find a date for the Passover full moon.[17] There are of course a number of complications. The beginning

---

[13] While Joachim Jeremias famously supported Mark's dating (*The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* [London: SCM, 1966], 20-33), a majority of more recent Jesus scholars have favoured John: J. Blinzler, *Trial of Jesus*, 101-8; R. E. Brown, *Death*, 1351-73; J. P. Meier, *Marginal*, 1:395-401; G. Theissen and A. Merz, *Historical Jesus*, 37; J. D. Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 100; and P. Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 221.

[14] See the detailed discussions in E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE* (London: SCM, 1992), 458-90; J. S. McLaren, *Power and Politics in Palestine: the Jews and the Governing of their Land, 100 BC – AD 70* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991); also H. K. Bond, *Caiaphas: Judge of Jesus and Friend of Rome?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 57-72.

[15] For fuller discussion, see J. Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 329-44.

[16] Ancient calendrical tables: S. Langdon and J. K. Fotheringham, *The Venus Talets of Ammizaduga* (London: OUP, 1928); R. A. Parker and W. H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 BC – AD 75* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1956). Applications of these to the date of Jesus' death include the following three articles by J. K. Fotheringham, 'The Date of the Crucifixion,' *Journal of Philology* 29 (1903), 100-18; 'Astronomical Evidence for the Date of the Crucifixion,' *JTS* 12 (1910), 120-7; and 'The Evidence of Astronomy and Technical Chronology for the Date of the Crucifixion,' *JTS* 35 (1934), 146-62; also K. Schoch, 'Christi Kreuzigung am 14. Nisan,' *Biblica* 9 (1928), 48-56; and A. T. Olmstead, 'The Chronology of Jesus' Life,' *Anglican Theological Review* (1942), pp. 1-26. For computer analyses, see note 20 below.

[17] Nisan was the first month of the Jewish year, corresponding roughly to our March or April; in the first century, the Passover seems to have always taken place after the vernal equinox, or after the 21st

of months in antiquity was calculated by observation of the new crescent moon in the evening sky; without specific climatic and atmospheric information, it is impossible to know exactly what would have been visible in Palestine.[18] Furthermore, it is not impossible that occasionally political or religious factors may have played a part in dating (for example the desire to avoid the day of Preparation of the Passover falling on a Sabbath). And finally, it is also clear that a lunar year of approximately 354 days needed an extra thirteenth month every few years in order to synchronize with the solar year; intercalations, however, seem to have been at the discretion of the Jewish high priestly rulers and so are difficult to factor into the figures.[19]

The most recent calculations (those by Colin Humphreys and D. G. Waddington in the science journal *Nature*) claim to have surmounted all these difficulties, though their dates are almost entirely in line with earlier proposals.[20] Thus, 14th Nisan appears to have fallen on two possible dates within our broader time period: Friday April 7th 30 CE or April 3rd 33. (By way of comparison, using the Synoptic dating, Nisan 15 fell on a Friday only in 27 CE and 34 CE, both of which are at the very margins of possibility.) It looks, then, as though astronomy has reinforced the Johannine tradition. Hence we have the two most popular dates for Jesus' death today, with those who favour a shorter ministry (or who date Lk 3.1-2 reasonably early) favouring 7th April 30, and the smaller group who favour a longer ministry opting for 3rd April 33.

II The Implications of this Date and the Evidence of Mark

At the heart of the most common dating of Jesus' death, then, is a preference for Johannine chronology, in which Jesus dies at the very moment that the paschal lambs were sacrificed in the Temple.[21] The crucifixion fits into a pattern whereby Jesus is shown from the very beginning of the gospel to be the replacement of Jewish feasts and institutions (the Temple, purification processes, the manna in the wilderness and so on). It is no great surprise to the reader to learn that now, at the feast of Passover, Jesus will take the place of the sacrificial lamb. As noted already, John's narrative is both internally coherent and consistent in its presentation of the timing of Jesus' death.

Yet I have to confess to being more than a little wary of placing too much historical reliability on John's account. The problem is not simply the theological use to which

---

March (a situation which changed after the fall of the Temple in 70 CE, either because there was no longer a need for the first fruits to be ripe before their presentation on 16th Nisan (so Jeremias, *Eucharistic*, 37) or because the lack of pilgrimage meant that weather conditions on the journey no longer mattered (so S. Stern, *Calendar and Community*, 65-85).

[18] So Stern, *Calendar and Community*, 100; Jeremias, *Eucharistic*, 36-41. See also the earlier article by C. H. Kraeling, 'Olmstead's Chronology of the Life of Jesus'*ATR* 24 (1942), 334-54, esp. 336-7; and more recently R. T. Beckwith, 'Cautionary Notes on the Use of Calendars and Astronomy to Determine the Chronology of the Passion,' in J. Vardaman and E. M. Yamauchi (eds.), *Chronos, Kairos, Christos*, 183-205.

[19] See J. K. Fotheringham, 'Evidence of Astronomy,' 155-8; S. Stern, *Calendar and Community*, 61.

[20] C. G. Humphreys and D. G. Waddington, 'Dating the Crucifixion,' *Nature* (1983), 743-6.

[21] The date and time are noted quite specifically in Jn 19.14. This corresponds with the sacrifice of the lambs in the temple on the 14th Nisan between mid/early afternoon and sundown: Ex 12.1-13, Lev 23.5, Jub 49.10, Josephus, *War* 6.423, Philo, *Questions and Answers on Exodus* 1.1, *Special Laws* 2.145, *m.Pes* 5.1, 3.

John puts his material: there is of course no reason why something should not be both theological and historical; it is perfectly possible for a good theologian to craft meaning from historical events. The difficulty is a methodological one. In a gospel not generally noted for its historical accuracy, it is unclear to me on what grounds we should prefer John's account at this point. It is undoubtedly the case that certain details here and there in the Fourth Gospel may well go back to historical reminiscences,[22] but I wonder whether the date of Jesus' death should really be assigned to this category. Surely a date which derived from Mark, our earliest and generally least tidy of the gospels, would be preferable. And a closer look at Mark, I suggest, is revealing.

Although Mark casts the last supper as a Passover meal, it is widely acknowledged that nothing in his account *requires* such a date. There is no reference to the lamb, to the bitter herbs, or the recitation of the Exodus story.[23] The Passover connection is made by only two passages, both of which are generally regarded as redactional: 14.1a, which exhibits a clear Markan proclivity for a double time reference[24]; and 14.12-16, which is undoubtedly based on the earlier story of the colt in Mk 11.1-11.[25] Once these two passages are removed, nothing in the Markan passion narrative links the last supper – and therefore Jesus' death itself - to the day of Passover. Furthermore, there are elements within the Markan account which sit awkwardly with the evangelist's dating:

1) The note that the chief priests and scribes decided not to arrest Jesus during the feast lest there be a tumult of the people (Mk 14.2).
This is an odd passage for a number of reasons. Quite obviously, Jesus' followers could have had no reliable knowledge of the plots of the Jewish authorities. The only specific information given here is the decision of the priestly leaders to arrest Jesus, which was almost certainly inferred from subsequent events. The *date* of the intended arrest, however, is interesting. Adela Collins puts stress on the phrase `e0n do/lw|` (by deceit) and suggests that what the chief priests agree to avoid is arresting Jesus *openly* during the feast in case of riots; their use of Judas achieves this aim, and thus for Mark there is no discrepancy between their intentions and ultimate activities.[26] More commonly, though, scholars do see a tension here between the plan of the

[22] See the two volumes edited by P. Anderson, F. Just and T. Thatcher, *John Jesus and History, vol I: Critical Appraisals of Critical Views* (Atlanta: SBL, 2007), and *John, Jesus and History, vol II: Aspects of Historicity in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: SBL, 2009).
[23] This is of course disputed by J. Jeremias, *Eucharistic*, 41-62; he tackles the difficulties raised in the following paragraphs on pp. 62-84, though not in my view entirely successfully. He regards the Jewish trial scene as the only serious internal problem with Mk's dating, pp. 78-9; I have deliberately omitted any discussion of the trial as I regard it as almost entirely Markan redaction, see D. Juel, *Messiah and Temple: the Trial of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977) and H. K. Bond, *Caiaphas*, 98-108.
[24] F. Neirynck, *Duality in Mark: Contributions to the Study of the Markan Redaction* (rev. ed. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1988), 45-6, 49; J. P. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, I.396-7. J. Marcus suggests the phrase here may be an allusion to Ps 10.7-8 (9.28-29 LXX), *Mark 8-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 932.
[25] See for example the conclusions of M. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1934), 182, 189.
[26] A. Y. Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 624; so also J. Jeremias, *Eucharistic*, 71-3. Problems of interpretation presumably lie behind the textual variant in the Western text which recasts the phrase as 'perhaps during the festival there will be a disturbance of the people' (thus not specifically a decision against arresting Jesus during the feast).

Jewish authorities (not to arrest Jesus during the feast) and the way events actually turn out (arrest on the day of Passover itself). Assuming he noticed the inconsistency, it is possible to argue that Mark allowed it to remain so as to highlight the theological point that events worked themselves out according to God's plan, not those of Jesus' enemies.[27] Even so, the discrepancy is intriguing, and it is hardly surprising that a majority of scholars are still inclined to accept the findings of the form critics who argued that this passage formed part of Mark's source, a source which dated Jesus' death rather differently to the chronology which Mark himself wished to promote.[28]

2) The release of Barabbas (Mk 15.6-15).
This is not the place to discuss the historicity of the supposed amnesty or the likelihood of a Roman governor releasing a dangerous prisoner at the whim of the crowd.[29] But the release of Barabbas is present in both the Markan and Johannine traditions and clearly goes back to an early, pre-gospel narrative of some sort or other. The release is commonly explained as an act of goodwill on the part of Pilate; but, as J. P. Meier notes, the gesture would lose all sense if the prisoner were not allowed to celebrate the feast with his friends and family.[30] The release must have allowed Barabbas enough time for his purification (whether the full week, or a reduced 'emergency' measure[31]) and makes most sense from the prefect's point of view as soon after his arrival in the city as possible. Thus, whatever we make of the details of the account, the Markan location of the Barabbas episode on the day of Passover itself is curious.

3) The note that Simon of Cyrene was 'coming in from the country/field' (Mk 15.21). However we translate a0p 0 a0grou=, Simon's actions are conceivably problematic for Mark's date. If Simon has just come in from the field, the implication seems to be that he has been working, something which was forbidden on the day of Passover (Ex 12.16, Lev 23.7-8). If he has just come in from the country (whether Cyrene, or more likely the surroundings of Jerusalem) he may well have walked more than was permitted on the Sabbath and holy days (Acts 1.12, m.Erub 4.3).[32] It is true that we have little information as to how these rules were actually practiced in first century Jerusalem, but the passage as a whole seems, once again, to sit awkwardly with Mark's dating.

4) Jesus' burial (Mk 15.42-46).

---

[27] So J. Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (Mk 8,27-16,20), EKK (Zurich: Neukirchener Verlag, 1979), 220. Lk omits these words, while Mt allows Jesus an extra passion prediction prior to the leaders' plot (Mt 26.1-2), an addition which tends to strengthen the literary-theological reading implicit in Mk.
[28] Dibelius, *Tradition*, 180-1; R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (rev. ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), 262-3, 434. See for example J. Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 932, 937-8.
[29] For fuller discussion, see H. K. Bond, 'Barabbas Remembered' in B. J. Oropeza, C. K. Robertson and D. Mohrmann (eds.), *Jesus and Paul: Global Perspectives in Honor of James D. G. Dunn for his 70th Birthday (*SCM, 2009), 59-71.
[30] J. P. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1: 400.
[31] Corpse impurity took a week to remove according to Num 19.16. It has been suggested that *m.Pes* 8.6 preserves a regulation which would allow a prisoner released just prior to the feast to participate in it (see C. B. Chavel, 'The Releasing of a Prisoner on the Eve of Passover in Ancient Jerusalem,' *JBL* 60 [1941], 273-78; though as J. Merkel noted, there is nothing to connect this with a supposed Passover 'amnesty,' 'Die Begnadigung am Passahfeste,' *ZNW* 6 (1905), 306-7).
[32] J. Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 1041.

Joseph of Arimathaea's pious actions make perfect sense against a Jewish background in which burial tended to be swift and allowing corpses to remain overnight was considered a curse (Dt 21.22-23). But Mark has him visiting Pilate, buying a shroud, and associating (in some way or another) with a burial – all on the day of Passover![33] We are reminded about the approaching Sabbath, but the Passover is completely ignored. The easiest explanation for all of this is that while Jesus may have died on the day before a Sabbath, that is a Friday, that day had nothing to do with the Passover.

5) The impression of a holy 'week' in Mark is much less secure than we often imagine. The transition between the early days, particularly Monday through to Wednesday is not at all clear, and the evangelist's arrangement of material is often topical rather than chronological (as was the case earlier in the gospel).[34] Historically, the interval between Jesus' triumphal entry and his Last Supper may have been significantly longer or even significantly shorter than a week. At all events, it is clear, as Adela Collins notes, that Mark is not particularly interested in chronology at this point.[35] He wants to show that Jesus died on the day of Passover, but has little interest in (or perhaps knowledge of) the time frame of events during Jesus' stay in Jerusalem.

Now I am by no means the only person to have highlighted these chronological complications in Mark. A routine trawl of the major commentaries will find them all listed and dealt with in various degrees. The most common conclusion to be drawn from them, however, is that they are indirect confirmation of the *Johannine* dating. Both Gerd Theissen and J. P. Meier, for example, argue for a pre-Markan passion narrative which exhibited a different chronology to that now found in Mark, but both assume that this agreed with John in dating Jesus' execution to the day of Preparation.[36] While I think it is quite clear that a pre-Markan chronology is still visible within the text, however, I see no indication that this chronology aligned with what we have in John. Our exegetical survey of Mark revealed the following points: First, Mark seems to have been aware of an earlier tradition which did not locate the execution during the feast (Mk 14.2, a note which would count against John's chronology too, as the Jewish authorities would hardly have divorced the day of Preparation from the rest of the feast, and in any case the risk of a riot was equally high - perhaps even higher - on this particular day). Second, the story of Barabbas, if connected to the execution of Jesus at all historically, may provide weak evidence for the trial of Jesus taking place some time before the festival. Third, nothing aside from two clearly redactional passages (Mk 14.1a and 14.12-16) link the execution of Jesus to the day of Passover, and the accounts of Simon and Jesus' burial reinforce the view that Jesus died on an ordinary day. Taking all of this into account, it is difficult not to agree with Matti Myllykoski that the earliest, oral stages of the passion tradition were

[33] For prohibitions against commercial transactions on holy days, see Lev 23.7-8, Neh 10.31, and Amos 8.5; also J. Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, 77-78. Perhaps it was this difficulty which led both Matthew and Luke to omit the detail of Joseph buying the cloth?

[34] For a detailed treatment of this, see G. M. Styler, 'The Chronology of the Passion Narratives,' *ATR* 23 (1941), 67-78. Both Mt and Lk, though following Mk's plan closely, depart from their source's suggestion that events took a 'week' – Mt compresses events of Sunday and Monday, while Lk omits transitions from day to day (Styler, 'Chronology,' 70-71).

[35] A. Collins, *Mark*, 640.

[36] G. Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 166-7; and J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, I:398.

not articulated in terms of exact dates, and that Jesus was crucified and buried *before* the Passover festival.[37]

Once the date of Jesus' death is cut loose from the traditional alternatives (the day of Passover/the day of Preparation), it is in theory just as possible that it occurred *after* the feast as before. Yet, quite apart from the questionable Barabbas episode, two factors incline me towards Myllykoski's preference for a date prior to the Passover. First, for security reasons it would have been better for both Jewish and Roman authorities to dispose of the threat posed by Jesus prior to the celebrations. Second, all our earliest Christian texts associate Jesus' death with the Passover. Psychologically, it seems to me, the close connection between Jesus' death and the feast is more likely if he was arrested in the midst of festal preparations, as people contemplated the meaning and significance of the feast, rather than afterwards, when pilgrims had begun to think about home and had perhaps already begun to leave the city. Certainty on this issue is clearly impossible, but the evidence seems to push in the direction of Jesus having been executed before the festivities began.

If this historical reconstruction is accurate, however, how do we account for the presentations of Jesus' death in Mark and John? The chronological frameworks of the two narratives now appear to differ not only from one another but also from actual historical events. I shall address this question in the next section, drawing on recent studies of memory, both individual and collective. I hope to show that both the Markan and the Johannine chronologies with which we are familiar are based on theological reflections derived from the memory that Jesus died *at around the time of the Passover*.

III Theology and Memory

To talk of a death 'at Passover' in the first century, just as now, did not necessarily mean that a person had died on Nisan 15th, any more than for a Christian to talk of the death of a loved one 'at Christmas' means that he or she died on the 25th December. The link with the feast, though, lends a certain poignancy to events. In our own context, a death at Christmas has a certain resonance - a loved one taken away at a feast where families come together, a life cut short at a festival celebrating new birth and hope. The connection with the feast adds an extra dimension to the death.

But how likely is it that the actual date of Jesus' death would be forgotten and/or replaced by a more theologically resonant one? The human memory has been studied exhaustively in recent decades, and the overriding picture which emerges is one of fragility and subjectivity. On an individual level, we tend to fill in the blanks, to make sense of what we see or hear, and to allow later information to blend into and inform

[37] M. Myllykoski, *Die Letzen Tage Jesu: Markus und Johannes, ihre Traditionen und die historische Frage* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1991-1994) 2.35-7, 153-4; see also his 'What Happened to the Body of Jesus?' in I. Dunderberg, C. Tuckett, and K. Syreeni (eds.), *Fair Play: Diversity and Conflicts in Early Christianity: Essays in Honour of Heikki Raisanen.* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 43-82. Myllykoski's views were anticipated to some extent by F. C. Burkitt who argued that the (Palestinian) Matthew's dependence on Mark at this point showed that the early church was not entirely sure of the date of Jesus' death ('The Last Supper and the Paschal Meal,' *JTS* 17 [1916], 291-7). It is more common to find objections to this line of argument, however; see for example the lengthy notes of J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* 1:429, n.109 and G. Theissen and A. Merz, *Historical Jesus*, 161, 585.

what we think we remember. Contrary to much popular opinion, intense personal memories (often referred to as 'flashbulb' memories) are no more accurate than others (though we are often quite confident that they are). Deterioration and change in memory begins within hours, as we relive experiences and struggle to make sense of them. Over time, we may retain the gist of what happened, but not the specific details; in other situations we may become increasingly confident regarding inaccurate details, simply because we have told the story so many times (in these cases what we are remembering is actually only the last time that we told the story). Time indications seem particularly prone to corruption: often we may remember an event, but not precisely when it happened, or even who we were with at the time. Strikingly, too, memories are always connected to our current experience, and questions of self-identity in the present effortlessly and unconsciously shape what we think we remember of the past.[38]

Even more significantly, however, memories function in a group context, as social memory, which binds individuals together. As numerous studies of traumatic situations have shown, difficult memories of the past are often replaced by groups – often quite unintentionally – by fictitious memories designed to ease the burden of the past, or to project an understanding onto the present.[39] As the earliest Christians came together to remember Jesus and to ponder the significance of his death, it would hardly be surprising if the immense weight of the Passover festival did not begin to shape their stories: to inspire them to talk of covenants, of sacrifice, of the plan of God from long ago, and to encourage hopes that the visions of the prophets and the promises of Jesus himself were about to be realised. The reading of texts such as Isaiah 53 and Psalms 22 (21 LXX), 69 (68 LXX) in the earliest Christian liturgy, could only have contributed to the sense that Jesus' death belonged in a meaningful way to the great story of Israel. Older stories were recycled, merged with recent traditions, and new memories created. In some liturgical contexts, the Eucharist might have evoked the earlier Passover covenant; in others, Jesus represented God's suffering righteous one; while others combined the Passover imagery with the story of the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement, viewing Jesus' sacrificial death as a means of removing sin.[40] Stories about Jesus were indirectly stories about the earliest Christians themselves, their relationship to what was past, and what they hoped for in the future.[41] At a time when dates could not easily be checked, there would have been very little to constrain the emergence of different recollections of the day of Jesus' death. Most followers of Jesus would have been willing to embrace the chronology of

[38] See the long discussion in D. C. Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 1-30, with bibliography. Also J. C. S. Redman, 'How Accurate Are Eyewitnesses? Bauckham and the Eyewitneses in the Light of Psychological Research,' *JBL* 129 (2010), 177-97; R. K. McIvor, *Memory, Jesus, and the Synoptic Gospels* (Atlanta: SBL, 2011).

[39] See the discussion in I. Noble, 'Memory and Remembering in the Post-Communist Context,' *Political Theology* 9 (2008), 455-75. More generally, see the volume edited by A. Kirk and T. Thatcher, *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (Atlanta: SBL, 2005), especially the essays by A. Kirk, T. Thatcher, B. Schwartz, A. Dewey, and W. Kelber.

[40] On early Christian ritual, see H. Koester, 'The Memory of Jesus' Death and the Worship of the Risen Lord,' *HTR* 91 (1998), 335-50; R. E. DeMaris, *The New Testament in its Ritual World* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008).

[41] D. Mendels, *Memory in Jewish, Pagan and Christian Societies of the Graeco-Roman World* (London: T & T Clark International/Continuum, 2004); C. Unterseher, 'The Holy Cross in the Liturgy of Jerusalem: The Happening at the Center of the Earth,' *Worship* 85 (2011), 329-50, see especially p. 330.

their particular group, especially as the eyewitnesses themselves began to pass away.[42] And what Christian would not want to embrace a more theologically meaningful date? As Doron Mendels perceptively notes, 'The memory in itself is what counted in antiquity, and not necessarily the reality behind it.'[43]

Jewish historiography shows a marked interest in the correlation of dates, though as James Barr has shown, biblical chronology tends to be far from historical in purpose.[44] The Hebrew Bible for example, gives more detailed dates at the beginning rather than at the end - the reader can count back from Solomon to creation, but has little sense of how biblical events map onto secular history; and in the New Testament, Matthew's genealogy, despite its three precise sets of 14, does not enable us to determine the year of Jesus' birth.[45] The point of it all is not to furnish us with historical dates, but to underscore the conviction that a divine plan lies behind human history. Precisely the same motive lay behind Judas Maccabaeus' decision to purify the sanctuary on the same day that it had been profaned by foreigners (25th Kislev; 2 Macc 10.5), and Josephus' note that the Second Temple fell on precisely the same date as the first Temple had fallen to the Babylonians (9th Av; *War* 6.269). After the fall of Jerusalem, several church fathers regarded the destruction of the temple as God's judgement on Jews for the death of Jesus – even though 40 years separated the two events.[46] Eusebius went so far as to claim that Jerusalem fell at *Passover*; while this ignores the clear testimony of Josephus (which the Caesarean Bishop obviously knew), it reinforces the sense of divine retribution for the death of Jesus (*H.E*. 3.5.5-6). Other church fathers tried to link the date of Jesus' death with the spring equinox, generally believed to have been the day on which the world was created.[47] It is clear that religious memory has never confined itself to the straightjacket of precise historical remembrance (even if such a thing were possible), but has always freely made connections in pursuit of deeper, theological truths.

---

[42] J. C. S. Redman classes ancient Mediterranean societies as 'interdependent cultures,' where individuals would tend to go with the group rather than choose their own 'correct' memory; 'How Accurate?' 187.

[43] D. Mendels, *Memory,* 37.

[44] See J. Barr, 'Why the World was Created in 4004 BC: Archbishop Ussher and Biblical Chronology,' *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library* 67 (1984-5), 575-608; J. Barr, 'Biblical Chronology: Legend or Science?' The Ethel M. Wood Lecture 1987, delivered at the Senate House, University of London, 4th March 1987 (London: University of London, 1987); J. Barr, 'Luther and Biblical Chronology,' *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 72 (1990), 51-67; J. Barr, 'Pre-Scientific Chronology: The Bible and the Origin of the World,' *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 143 (1999), 379-87; and J. Hughes, *Secrets of the Times. Myth and History in Biblical Chronology* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990).

[45] J. Barr, 'Biblical Chronology,' 8.

[46] For example, Justin Martyr, *Dialogue* 16; Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.47, 4.73, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* 10.17.

[47] So Tertullian, *Adv. Jud*. 8; Hippolytus, *In Dan*. 4.23; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom*. 1.21 (146); I owe these references to M. H. Shepherd, 'Are Both the Synoptics and John Correct?' 126.
The Byzantine feast of the Holy Cross (or *Enkainea*) brought together a number of traditions associated with Jesus' death and resurrection which had little historical connection, but which allowed the faithful to contemplate the mysteries of the feast. The dedication of the church (which took place in 335) is iconographically linked with the Empress Helena (who died in 330) and often with Constantine (who does not appear to have attended the service). By the late fourth century, the nun Egeria could associate the feast day, the 13th September, not only with the founding of the basilica and the finding of the true cross, but also with the dedication of Solomon's Temple, *Itinerarium* 48.2. See C. C. Unterseher, 'Holy Cross, 336-9.

If we turn to our earliest accounts of Jesus' death, we can see this process in its earliest stages. Undoubtedly Jesus' death was given a theological interpretation, inspired by its festal setting, right from the beginning (perhaps in the minds of some faithful onlookers even as he hung on the cross). By the 50s, Paul was a witness to what was probably a widespread understanding of Jesus as 'our paschal lamb' (to\ pa/sxa h9mw~n), though in a context which did not require the apostle to give any specific date for the crucifixion (1Cor 5.7). Clearly all that was important for Paul was to set Jesus' death against the backdrop of God's saving acts in the past, and to appreciate its theological significance. As the first passion narratives began to be composed, however, this theological understanding had to become more concrete. The tradition known to John placed Jesus' death at the very moment that the lambs were sacrificed in the Temple, casting him as the new paschal lamb, whose death removed the sins of the world.[48] A different tradition linked Jesus' last meal to the Passover, so that the eucharistic commemoration of Jesus' death now took the place of the Passover meal, and became the symbol of the new covenant between God and his people. This is the interpretation found in Mark and enhanced in the longer version of Luke 22.14-20. Thus, both the Johannine and Markan traditions narratively represent Jesus' death as profoundly meaningful, but both are based in the end not on any historical reminiscence, but on collective theological and symbolic elaborations of the memory that Jesus died 'around Passover.'

Conclusion

I began by looking at the most common date for Jesus' death - 7th April 30 CE - and considered its emergence and implications. I then offered an alternative (and in my view more likely) reading of the passion narratives in which Jesus' death actually took place some time (perhaps up to a week) prior to the day of Passover. I see no good reason to doubt that Jesus was executed on a Friday; the only thing that I want to challenge is the precise link between these events and the Passover. If I am correct, this means that we can no longer use astronomy to date Jesus' death. It is no longer a question of looking for 14th or 15th Nisan, because Jesus' death could have happened at any date round about then – perhaps the 11th or the 10th or the 9th Nisan. We simply have no way of knowing. And while it would be wonderful to have one secure date in the wild mass of competing Jesus traditions (comparable perhaps to the Gallio inscription in chronologies of Paul), I suspect that one of the main reasons why normally hard headed Jesus critics sign up so quickly to 7th April 30 CE is because they desperately want it to be true. In the end, all that the evidence allows us to claim is that Jesus died some time around the Passover, perhaps a few days before the feast, any time between 29 and 34 CE.

[48] This interpretation is also to be found in 1Pet 1.19, Rev 5.6, 9, 12, 12.11, *Gos. Pet* 3 and *b.Sanh* 43 - though at least some of these may be dependent on the Fourth Gospel.