



Questions about the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ?

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As Easter week approaches, questions about the Faith will be asked more frequently, both by those who truly seek the truth, and those who seek to cause doubt. One you might hear is...

Does the Passion Narrative Contain Contradictions or Historical Errors?

Various claims have been made regarding the narrative that chronicles the events that led up to Jesus' crucifixion. For example, it has been asserted that the Gospels contradict each other regarding the day and time of the Crucifixion and that events like the release of Barabbas would not have occurred.

Regarding the day on which Christ was crucified, all four Gospels

indicate it was a Friday, which was then known as the *Day of Preparation*—that is, the day on which people cooked food and made other preparations since they would not be allowed to work on Saturday—the Sabbath—which began at sundown ([Matthew 27:62](#), [Mark 15:42](#), [Luke 23:54](#), [John 19:31](#), [John 19:42](#)).

The point that is disputed is the relationship of this Friday to the feast of Passover. The synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) indicate that Jesus celebrated the Last Supper as a Passover meal ([Matthew 26:19](#), [Mark 14:16](#), [Luke 22:13](#), [Luke 22:15](#)). Since he was crucified on the afternoon of the following day, this would place the Crucifixion on the same day by Jewish reckoning—that is, on the day of Passover.

However, some claim that John places the crucifixion of Jesus, the Lamb of God, at the same time the lambs were being slaughtered at the temple in preparation for the Passover feast. As the Jewish authorities did not want to enter Pilate’s headquarters “so that they might not be defiled, but might eat the Passover” ([John 18:28](#)), this would suggest Jesus was crucified the day *before* the Passover meal was eaten.

There are multiple solutions to this difficulty. One of them consists of two points: first, **John never says Jesus was crucified when the lambs were being slaughtered.** This myth is so commonly repeated that people think it’s in the Bible when it is not. It is simply a theological explanation of why John may have thought it appropriate to place the Crucifixion in parallel with the eve of the Passover, if this is what he did.

Second, the reason that the Jewish authorities didn’t want to defile themselves was because Passover continued for a week after the lamb

was eaten ([Exodus 12:15](#), [Exodus 18:20](#)), and they wanted to *continue* to eat sanctified food during the festival.

John thus does not contradict the synoptics' indication that Jesus was crucified on the first day of Passover, following the eating of the Passover lamb the previous evening.

Regarding the time of day, Mark says Jesus was crucified at “the third hour” ([Mark 15:25](#)), and all three synoptics record the darkness from “the sixth hour” to “the ninth hour” while he was on the cross ([Matthew 27:45](#); [Mark 15:33](#); [Luke 23:44](#)), but John indicates that Jesus wasn't yet crucified at “the sixth hour” ([John 19:14](#)).

The solution is straightforward: **in first-century Judea**, the custom was to count twelve hours from sunrise, as illustrated in Jesus' parable in [Matthew 20:1–16](#), where a man hires workers at the third, sixth, ninth, and eleventh hours of daytime.

*1.

John, however, was using the **Roman** practice of counting hours beginning at midnight. Thus in [John 1:39](#) two disciples are said to spend “that day” with Jesus, even though they met him “about the tenth hour.” This would make more sense if John were counting from midnight (making the tenth hour 10 a.m.) than if he was counting from dawn (making the tenth hour 4 p.m.). (See [John 1:39 in NABRE](#))

The timing of the Crucifixion thus is clear if we take account of the two systems of reckoning hours. In John, Pilate brings Jesus out to the crowd at “about the sixth hour” after midnight (around 6 a.m.). (Again, See [John 19:14 in NABRE](#) and [John 19:14 in RSVCE](#)) According to Mark he is then crucified at “the third hour” after dawn (around 9 a.m.). And

according to all three synoptics, darkness covered the land from the sixth to the ninth hours after dawn (from around noon to 3 p.m.).

As to the release of Barabbas, we do not have an extrabiblical record that says, “Pilate customarily released a prisoner at Passover,” but that’s hardly surprising. Releasing a prisoner at the Jewish capital on a Jewish feast would be a purely local custom, and we don’t have detailed records of the Roman administration in Judea.

However, leaders often pardon popular political prisoners to curry favor with their subjects. We have records of ancient rulers in Judea doing just that. Both Herod Archelaus (4 B.C.–A.D. 6) and the Roman governor Albinus (A.D. 62–64) did so. And the Jewish Mishnah (a collection of oral traditions) contains provisions for slaughtering the Passover lamb for prisoners released at Passover.^{ccxv}

Even if we didn’t know all that, the Gospels are historical records in their own right, they must be taken seriously, and all four mention the custom ([Matthew 27:15](#), [Mark 15:6](#), [Luke 23:18](#), [John 18:39](#)).

Poster’s NOTE:

This is the [catholic.com webmail](#) promo referred to at the beginning of the article.

1. To illustrate this see John 19:14 in [NABRE](#) and John 19:14 in [RSVCE](#)

According to John’s reckoning of time, Jesus was arrested on Thursday night after the Last Supper, then was presented to the

high priest Annas, then Annas sent Him to the high priest Ca'iaphas who, in turn, sent Him to the Roman Procurator Pilate, who had Him scourged and a crown of thorns placed on His head. All of this took place during the night.

Then Pilate presented Jesus to the Jews in the morning (In the 6th hour, according to John) saying "Here is your King!" and asking if they would have Jesus freed, but the Jews called to Pilate, saying that they would have Pilate free Barabbas the robber instead. When Pilate asked what they would have done with Jesus, the Jews answered, "Away with him, away with him, crucify him!" This happened at 6 o'clock in the morning (the 6th hour) according to the Roman reckoning of time (used by John) rather than at noon, which was the Judean reckoning of time.

This would also mean that Jesus was crucified at 9 o'clock in the morning and the darkness was from 12 noon until 3 o'clock in the afternoon, then Jesus was taken down from the cross and brought to His burial tomb and prepared for burial before nightfall on that day, which was Friday, the Day of Preparation. Because at nightfall the sabbath, a high day began and the Jews did not want bodies remaining on the cross on the sabbath – all by the Roman Reckoning of time of day, rather than the Judean Reckoning.

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