

Chronology of the Crucifixion and Resurrection According to Ancient Texts

In the Christian world today, the predominant view concerning the chronology of Christ's last days is that He celebrated the Last Supper on Thursday evening, was arrested that same night, crucified on Friday, and rose on Sunday morning. In the early Church, however, one finds evidence of a widespread view that Christ held His Last Supper on Tuesday evening. There is also evidence, to a certain extent, that there were early Christians who believed in a midweek crucifixion and a Saturday (Sabbath) resurrection.

To support the theory of a Tuesday night Last Supper tradition, the earliest source where I have found evidence is the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, a church order which is supposed to have been composed *circa* A.D. 200. It states, "For while He was yet with us before He suffered, as we were eating the Passover with Him, He said to us, "Today, in this night, one of you will betray Me." And Judas came with the scribes and with the priests of the people and betrayed our Lord Jesus. And so in the night when the fourth day of the week drew on, he betrayed our Lord to them. But they made payment to Judas . . . on the second day of the week. . . For when we had eaten the Passover on the third day of the week at even, we went forth to the Mount of Olives, and in the night they seized our Lord Jesus."¹

By the end of the third century a fast was celebrated on Wednesday (until 3:00 p.m.) to commemorate Christ's arrest.

¹ *Didascalia Apostolorum*, (translated by R. High Connolly), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929, p. 181.

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Victorinus, Bishop of Petau (martyred in A.D. 304) explains, “Now is manifested the reason of the truth why the fourth day is called the Tetras, why we fast even to the ninth hour . . . The man Christ . . . was taken prisoner by wicked hands, by a quarternion, on account of the majesty of His works . . . therefore, we make a station or a supernumerary fast.”²

Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis (367-403 A.D.), says, “Wednesday and Friday are days of fasting up to the ninth hour because, as Wednesday began the Lord was arrested and on Friday he was crucified.”³

Even though by this time Friday was believed to be the day of the crucifixion, Wednesday was still known as the day of Christ’s arrest. The early *Pseudepigraphal Book of Adam and Eve* (composed approximately A.D. 400) states the same. It says, “Then the Word of God said to Adam: “Adam, you have determined in advance the days when sufferings will come upon me when I shall have become flesh; for those days are Wednesday and Friday.””⁴ (The literal translation is actually the “fourth” instead of “Wednesday” and “the preparation” in place of “Friday.”)

Another pseudepigraphal work called *The Narrative of Joseph* (originally believed to have been composed in the fourth century, but which copy we have is only from the twelfth century) states, “Jesus also was taken on the third day before the Passover, in the

2 *The Writing of Quintus Sept. Flor. Tertullianus with the extant works of Victorinus and Commodianus*, vol. 3, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1895, pp. 388, 389.

3 Annie Jaubert, *The Date of the Last Supper*, N.Y., Alba House, 1965, p. 77.

4 *Supra.* n. 3. p. 79.

evening. And on the following day, the fourth day of the week, they brought Him at the ninth hour into the hall of Caiaphas.”⁵

In most modern liturgical churches today, the reason for the Wednesday fast is largely forgotten, however, the Wednesday fast is very much alive in Eastern Orthodox Churches. Even today in the Coptic Church the reason for fasting on Wednesday echoes the exact reason why the primitive Christian church fasted on Wednesday. The *Coptic Encyclopedia* states, “The Coptic Church ordains that Wednesday and Friday be observed as fast days, the former being the day on which Jesus Christ was condemned to be crucified, and the latter being the day on which his crucifixion took place.”⁶

Though the above quoted references show that a Friday crucifixion was endorsed alongside a [late] Tuesday last supper belief, in the *Acts of Pilate* (a pseudepigraphal work originally composed in the fourth century) a midweek crucifixion seems to be indicated. According to the *Acts of Pilate*, Karinus and Leucius, two saints who were supposedly resurrected at the time of Christ’s resurrection, were reported to have been told by Christ to stay at Jerusalem for three more days to complete the observation of Passover.⁷

One Greek version says, “Thereafter we went unto Jerusalem also and accomplished the Passover.” One Latin version states, “For three days only were allowed unto us who rose from the dead,

5 *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 8, Michigan. Wm. B. Eerdmans. 1956, p. 468.

6 *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 4, N.Y.: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1991, p. 1096.

7 Montague Rhodes James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1960, pp. 142, 143.

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to keep the Passover of the Lord in Jerusalem with our kindred (parents) that are living for a testimony of the resurrection of Christ the Lord. And after three days, when we had kept the Passover of the Lord, all they were caught up in the clouds which had risen with us and were taken over Jordan and were no more seen by any man.”⁸

Since Christ was killed on the preparation day of the Passover, seven days of unleavened bread followed and then the Passover festival was completed. The statement that only three days were left to accomplish the Passover after Christ’s resurrection would indicate that Christ spent a full three days and three nights in the grave, and not only parts of three days. Thus the *Acts of Pilate* seem to promote a midweek crucifixion.

If one assumes the Last Supper took place on a Tuesday evening and Christ was crucified on a Wednesday, then Thursday would have to be a Sabbath day, since the scriptures state that Christ was crucified on the preparation day before the Sabbath.

Luke 23:54 says, “And that day was the preparation, and the Sabbath drew on.” **John 19:31** says, “The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain upon the cross on the Sabbath day, (for that Sabbath day was a high day) besought Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away.”

Rabbi Samuel Lacks states, “The day of preparation (Greek *paraskeue*) equals Friday or the day before a holiday.”⁹ Since the day of preparation can mean a day before any holy day, the

8 Ibid.

9 Samuel Tobias Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary of the New Testament*, New Jersey: Ktav Publishing House, Inc. 1987, p. 437.

preparation day Christ was crucified on could well have been on a Wednesday and the Passover Sabbath on a weekday (i.e., Thursday). With this scenario, their Passover meal would have been on a Tuesday. According to **Leviticus 23:5-8** the fourteenth of the first month is the day of the Passover meal and the day following, the fifteenth, is a Passover Sabbath. It reads, “In the fourteenth day of the first month at even is the Lord’s Passover. And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the feast of unleavened bread unto the Lord. Seven days ye must eat unleavened bread. In the first day ye shall have a holy convocation: ye shall do no servile work therein.” Therefore the Passover Sabbath could be on a weekday.

Christ died on the preparation day at the ninth hour (3:00 p.m.) and was buried before sunset. If that day were a Wednesday, then three full days and three full nights later would be Saturday at 3:00 p.m., or just before sunset.

According to this chronology, Christ would have to be resurrected on Saturday after 3:00 p.m., yet before sunset. He would have been resurrected on the Sabbath day. This is evidently what some early Christians believed. In the early Christian church there were many who believed that the resurrection of Christ took place on the Sabbath, which is Saturday, the seventh day of the week. By the fifth century A.D., Easter Sunday celebrations of Christ’s resurrection were widespread in Christianity. However, the Church historian Socrates (ca. 440 A.D.) in a section of his history entitled, “Differences of usage in regard to Easter,” reveals that in the East there were Christians who celebrated Easter on Sabbath

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instead of Sunday. He stated, “Others in the East kept that feast on the Sabbath indeed.”¹⁰

Bishop Gregory of Tours (A.D. 538-594) tells us that many in France believed Christ arose on the seventh day of the week, even though he himself defended a Sunday resurrection belief. He stated, “Now in our belief the resurrection of the Lord was on the first day, and not on the seventh as many deem.”¹¹

Alexander Ross (A.D. 1590-1654) tells us the Armenians believed in a Saturday resurrection, though he disagrees with them. He stated, “The Armenii taught . . . that Christ rose from the dead on the Sabbath day, whereas the Scripture tells us plainly that He arose on the third day.”¹²

Though the belief that Christ rose on the Sabbath has appeared to be long forgotten and abandoned by most Christians today, vestiges of this belief appear to have survived in an indirect way through certain ceremonies in the eastern church. For example, in the Coptic Church, on Holy Saturday “following the ninth hour (i.e., 3:00 p.m.), the Divine Liturgy is celebrated.”¹³ As early as 400 A.D., both Socrates and Sozomen state that in Egypt there was a Sabbath evening celebration of the communion.¹⁴ In the Nestorian Church in India the communion (Qurbana) is still celebrated to this

10 *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 2, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1952, p. 131.

11 Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, Vol. 2, (trans. by D.M. Dalton), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927, p. 24.

12 Alexander Ross, *Panthebeia: or A View of All the Religions of the World*, London, John Saywell, 1658, p. 219.

13 *Supra*, n. 6, p. 1252.

14 *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, (ed. Kenneth A. Strand), Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1982, p. 171.

day at sunset on Holy Saturday in honor of Christ's resurrection. Mar Aprem says, "On Holy Saturday it is stated that Qurbana should be at sunset. Because it is believed that Jesus rose from the tomb at that time."¹⁵

Since Christ died at the ninth hour (3:00 p.m.) on the day of preparation, and if this day was a Wednesday, then a full three days and three nights later would bring one to 3:00 p.m., Saturday. Since Christ was buried before sunset, then Christ would have been raised before sunset. The time of Christ's Saturday resurrection would have been between 3:00 p.m. and sunset — no later.¹⁶

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15 Mar Aprem, *Sacraments of the Church of the East*, India: Mar Narsai Press, 1978, p. 112.

16 CHCoG: As Jesus said he would spend three days and three nights *in the heart of the earth*, his resurrection was just as the Sabbath was ending, which was 72 hours after he was interred in the tomb.