

The Chronology of Easter

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S P Townsend

This is an investigation into the chronology of the second-half of the Passion week. It considers relevant Scripture passages, other historical references and astronomical data, in an attempt to understand on which days of the week the major events took place. The conclusion is that the traditionally-held chronology remains the best choice in the light of the evidence currently available. Under this chronology the Last Supper took place on Thursday evening, the crucifixion on Friday, and the resurrection sometime between sunset on Saturday and sunrise on Sunday.

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1. Introduction

There are two main accusations made concerning the accuracy of the Biblical accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. One is that the testimonies of the various participants in the resurrection story are incompatible. The other is that the chronologies described in different gospels are inconsistent.

1.1 Incompatible Testimonies

The first charge arises because of apparent discrepancies in the accounts of the resurrection encounters. For instance, Matthew says that Mary Magdalene and another Mary went to the tomb, encountered an angel, and then, as they hurried to tell the disciples, met Jesus himself (Matt 28:1-10). John, however, says that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, saw the stone had been rolled away, and then ran to tell Peter and John that the body had been moved to some unknown location (John 20:1-2).

John Wenham, in his book “Easter Enigma,” made a detailed analysis of the gospel accounts of the resurrection¹. He concluded that, far from being incompatible, the accounts demonstrate the hallmarks of accurate, independent, eye-witness testimony. He showed that it is possible to slot the different statements together, like pieces of a jig-saw puzzle, in such a way that they complement each other rather than contradict. His work has fully answered the allegations of incompatibility and inaccuracy in the resurrection accounts.

1.2 Inconsistent Chronologies

The second charge derives from the difficulties in placing the Easter events in the Passover timetable. For instance, Luke appears to put the arrest of Jesus after the Passover was eaten (Luke 22). John appears to place it before (John 18:28). In general Matthew, Mark and Luke appear to adhere to a different chronology to John.

The superficial response is to conclude that one or other account contains errors. However, this response would be unwise, for a number of reasons. First of all, the accounts have the characteristics of eye-witness testimony. It is well known that eye-witness accounts generally contain variations. All witnesses can be entirely correct in what they say, but differences in their perspective of the event, the selectivity of their memory recall, and the way that they express themselves, can give rise to apparent discrepancies. Secondly, even if the Apostles did have difficulty in remembering some of the events correctly, it is extremely unlikely that mistakes in their teaching would have persisted without being corrected before the accounts were finally committed to writing. The Apostles spent much of their time during the early years of the Church recounting to new converts the significant events in the life and teaching of Jesus (Matt 28:20; Acts 2:42; 6:2-4). Undoubtedly as time went by these accounts would have been adjusted as they listened to each other and received feedback from their hearers. Any glaring inconsistencies would have been challenged and corrected at an early stage. Thirdly, Jesus himself promised the Apostles that the Holy Spirit would actively help them keep the record straight (John 14:26). There are good reasons then to expect the accounts to be correct. If so it should be possible to describe a chronology of events that is in agreement with each of the gospels.

1.3. Difficulties in Fixing the Easter Chronology

The following are some of the difficulties or uncertainties encountered when attempting to construct a consistent chronology from the four Gospels.

1. There is uncertainty about whether Jesus was crucified on the Jewish date Nisan 14 (the day the Passover lambs were sacrificed) or Nisan 15 (the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread).

2. There is uncertainty about whether or not the Last Supper was a formal Passover meal involving the consumption of the Paschal lamb.
3. There is uncertainty about which day of the week of the Julian Calendar Nisan 14 corresponded to in the year of the crucifixion.
4. There is uncertainty as to the precise meaning of phrases such as “three days and three nights,” “on the third day,” “in three days,” and “after three days” which were used by Jesus in connection with the period of time between his death and resurrection.
5. It is not clear how much time elapsed between the resurrection of Jesus and the discovery of the empty tomb. There is uncertainty about whether He rose on Saturday evening (or perhaps even earlier) or on Sunday morning.

2. Passover

The Jewish festival of Pesach, known more commonly as Passover, is a commemoration of God’s deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, at the time of Moses. The Passover sacrifice was a remembrance of how God “passed over” the believing Israelites when He struck the Egyptians with the final plague – the death of the firstborn.

2.1 The First Passover

Exodus 12 and 13 record the first Passover and the institution of the festival. Lev 23:4-8, Numbers 9:1-14, Numbers 28:16-25 and Deut 16:1-8 give instructions for celebrating the festival subsequently.

For the first Passover, the Israelite families were each instructed to set aside a sacrificial lamb on the 10th Nisan (this month was originally called Abib). This lamb was cared for until 14th Nisan, when it was slaughtered at twilight. The lamb’s blood was brushed

on the sides and tops of the doorframe as a sign to the Lord. This sign protected the inhabitants of the house from the final plague that afflicted the Egyptians. After the lamb was sacrificed, it was roasted over fire, along with bitter herbs and bread made without yeast. During the evening this Passover meal was eaten. Everyone had to be fully dressed, ready to leave at a moment's notice. About midnight the Lord struck down all of the firstborn in the land. The only people to escape were the Israelites who were protected by the sign of the blood. They had to stay inside their houses until morning. By then any remnants of the meal had to be burnt.

2.2 The Passover Festival

In subsequent years the Lord's Passover was commemorated in a similar fashion on 14th Nisan, except that there seemed to be no requirement for them to repeat the brushing of blood on the doorframes. It is noteworthy that the killing of the Passover lamb was carried out by lay people. Deuteronomy 16:2 says that this should be done in the place that the Lord had chosen as a dwelling for his Name. After Solomon's temple was built this was understood to be Jerusalem. Even so, there was no Scriptural requirement for priests to be involved. In practice at the time of Jesus the priests were active participants in the ceremony.

Although the day of the Lord's Passover was clearly prescribed by Moses, there is a particular difficulty in understanding precisely when the Passover lambs were sacrificed. Exodus 12:6 says the lamb should be sacrificed at twilight, and Leviticus 23:5 says that the commemoration of the Lord's Passover should begin at twilight on 14th Nisan. Deuteronomy 16:6 says the sacrifice should be made in the evening, when the sun goes down. The Israelite day formally commenced as darkness fell after sunset, and finished the same time the following evening. So the question is, which end of the day 14th Nisan was the lamb to be sacrificed: after darkness set in at the beginning of the day, or before darkness set in at the end of the day?

For more than two thousand years the Jews have generally interpreted Moses' instructions to mean that the Passover lamb should be sacrificed before sunset as Nisan 14 draws to a close. However, this still leaves open the question whether this is a correct interpretation. This issue will be discussed later in more detail, in section 6.2.

2.3 The Feast of Unleavened Bread

On 15th Nisan the seven-day Feast of Unleavened bread commenced, which continued until 21st Nisan. During this period no bread containing yeast could be consumed. In this festival the people remembered how God had brought them out of Egypt on 15th Nisan, in such haste that there had been no time to add yeast to their dough before leaving. All traces of yeast had to be removed from the house prior to the start of 15th Nisan. This made 14th Nisan, in particular, a special day of preparation, on which a final search for yeast was religiously carried out. The 15th and 21st Nisan were special festival days, set aside as days of rest and sacred assembly. No regular work could be carried out on them, except for the preparation of meals.

The Festival Days were independent of the regular weekly Sabbaths, and only occasionally coincided with them. There were seven such Festival Days throughout the year (Lev 23). In the case of one of them, the Day of Atonement, the term "sabbath" is explicitly used (Lev 23:32). The other six are referred to as rest days, without explicitly using the term "sabbath". Even so it is quite clear that they were intended to be treated as Sabbaths in all respects, except in the preparation of meals.

The term "Passover" is used in different contexts to refer to: (1) the lamb that was sacrificed (Ex 12:21); (2) the meal at which the lamb was eaten (Ex 12:11); (3) the day of 14th Nisan (Nu 28:16); (4) the entire festival period encompassing 14th Nisan and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Acts 12:3,4). At the time of Jesus it seems that

the terms “Passover” and “Feast of Unleavened Bread” were often used synonymously (Mark 14:1).

2.4 The Festival of First Fruits

Another special event associated with Passover was the Festival of the First Fruits (Lev 23:9-14). At this festival a sheaf of the first barley grain harvested in the spring was waved before the Lord, accompanied by sacrificial offerings. The Law specified that this was to take place on the day following the Sabbath. The Jews interpreted this to mean the first Sabbath after the Passover preparation on 14th Nisan. However there was some dispute between the Pharisees and Sadducees as to which particular Sabbath this meant. The Pharisees believed it to be the first Feast Day of Unleavened Bread, on 15th Nisan, and that consequently the Festival of First Fruits should take place the day after, on 16th Nisan. The Sadducees believed it to be the first weekly Sabbath after Passover, making the Festival of First Fruits always occur on a Sunday by the Julian calendar.

One interesting point arising from this dispute is that the Jews were clearly familiar with debating which particular day in Passover week the word “sabbath” referred to. It is fascinating that the Church has been involved in a similar debate for two centuries, although for different reasons.

3. Alternative Easter Chronologies

Various chronologies have been proposed for the second half of the Passion Week. The following narrative considers the five alternatives that seem to have most support in the literature. In each case the main features are described, the significant issues that arise from the Biblical record are discussed, and a conclusion is reached as to how compatible the chronology is with the Scriptures.

One of the chronologies, Chronology E, considers the implication of a sunrise to sunrise reckoning of the days of the month, rather

than the more traditional sunset to sunset reckoning used in the other chronologies.

All of the chronologies have issues that raise questions about their validity. In one case, Chronology C, it seems that all of the issues can be resolved satisfactorily. In another case, Chronology A, most issues can be resolved satisfactorily, but there remains a significant concern. However, it should be recognised that many of the more troublesome issues might cease to be important were more information available to clarify the original intention of the gospel writers.

Note that for all of these chronologies it is suggested that Jesus was raised on Saturday night. It may, of course, have been after midnight on Sunday morning. Some have even suggested that it was earlier on Saturday evening before, or as, the Sabbath ended. The gospels provide no clues; apparently there were no human witnesses to the actual resurrection event other than Jesus himself.

3.1 Chronology A

The Last Supper was eaten on Nisan 14, the evening before the Jews sacrificed the Passover lambs; the Feast Day and the weekly Sabbath were concurrent.

	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
sunrise	Nisan 11	Nisan 12	Nisan 13	Nisan 14	Nisan 15	Nisan 16
				Trial of Jesus	Feast Day and	Stone moved
					Weekly Sabbath	Empty tomb visited
sunset				Crucifixion Passover slain Jesus buried	Sabbath ends	
	Nisan 12	Nisan 13	Nisan 14	Nisan 15	Nisan 16	Nisan 17
			Last Supper	Weekly Sabbath	Jesus raised	

Diagram 1 – Chronology A

Features

- Passover lambs slain between 3 and 5 pm Friday afternoon.
- Last Supper eaten the day before, on Thursday evening.
- Arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus takes place the day before the concurrent Feast Day and weekly Sabbath, on the day the Passover lambs were slain.
- Jesus buried for part of Nisan 14, all of Nisan 15 and part of Nisan 16 – a period encompassing at most two nights.

Issues

1. This chronology sets the Last Supper on the evening before the Passover lambs were slain. But the gospels describe the Last Supper as a Passover meal.

Discussion

The gospels appear to describe the Last Supper as a Passover meal. (Matt 26:17-20; Mark 14:12-18; Luke 22:7-16; John 13:1-5). If this was the case then it would seem to

imply that Jesus was crucified on Nisan 15, not Nisan 14. This issue has given rise to prolonged debate within the Church since the second century AD, a dispute that has never been resolved to general satisfaction.

One explanation presented is that the Last Supper was not a formal Passover meal. Peter and John were indeed sent to prepare the Passover (Luke 22:7-12) but they were sent early evening at the beginning of Nisan 14. Later that same evening, well before their preparations for celebrating the Passover itself had been completed, they all met together for what was to prove to be their final meal. It has to be said, though, that this does not fit easily with a straightforward reading of the accounts.

Another explanation is that the Last Supper was indeed a formal Passover meal, but that it was held one day before the time when many other Jews celebrated the Passover. Some believe that there was a genuine dispute regarding the Jewish calendar itself, which resulted in some celebrating Passover on one day and others the next. The whole issue has been expertly analysed by both Hoehner² and Marshall⁷. Their conclusion is that, for one reason or another, the Passover meal was celebrated by different groups on different days. Even though this is a plausible argument, it has to be noted that there is little, if any, external evidence to support this explanation.

There is another reason why Jesus might have eaten the Passover meal 24 hours before the rest of the Jews. Since the return from the Babylonian exile the Jews might have eaten the Passover meal on the wrong day entirely. If so it would not be surprising if Jesus' practice was different from the norm, since He was called to "fulfil all righteousness" (Matt 3:15). This will be discussed more fully in a later section.

This issue raises a serious question about the validity of Chronology A. However, it is possible to interpret the Scripture passages in a way that is consistent with the chronology.

2. Late on Sunday afternoon Cleopas and his companion said, “*It is now the third day since [literally ‘from which’] these things occurred*” (Luke 24:21). But under this chronology Sunday was only the second day since the crucifixion.

Discussion

It has been argued that the Jews would have counted the day of the crucifixion as the first day, in which case the Sunday was indeed the third day under this chronology. But this argument is extremely tenuous. It may be true that if the travellers had been referring to an event that spanned part of Friday, Saturday and part of Sunday, then they might have referred to the Sunday as being the third day of the event. For example, Jesus’ words “rise from the dead on the third day” (Luke 24:46) could arguably count the day of crucifixion as the first day. But here they were describing the time that had elapsed since an event in the past, i.e. the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus. On the day of the crucifixion itself they would not have said, “It is now the first day since the crucifixion happened;” such a statement would only have made sense on the following day. Consequently, if this chronology is correct, on Sunday the travellers would have said, “It is now the second day since these things occurred.”

However, there is a possibility that the travellers were assuming a sunrise to sunrise definition of a day. It is also possible that by “since these things occurred” they actually meant “since these things started to occur.” If so, then they might have referred to the Sunday afternoon as being three days later.

There is some room for doubt here, so although this issue challenges this chronology, it cannot be said to definitely contradict it.

3. Jesus said that he would be in the grave for three days and three nights, and that this would be a sign to the Jewish leaders (Matt 12:40). But under this chronology Jesus was only in the grave for one day and two nights.

Discussion

There has been much debate on how to interpret the phrase “three days and three nights”. It has been conjectured that it was an idiom familiar to the Jews of the time, with an imprecise meaning similar to “two or three days,” or “a weekend.” Certainly the phrase occurs in the Old Testament, as Jesus himself reminded his hearers. Whether as a consequence the phrase was in common use is possible, but there is no specific evidence that it was so.

There is little doubt that the Jews would have been quite familiar with the use of the term “for three days” to describe a period that encompassed part of the first day, all of the second day, and part of the third day. We use a similar construction ourselves, when we speak of a “three-day event.” We do not thereby imply a 72-hour period; merely that the event has activities on each of three successive days. Hoehner³ argues that a similar principle applies to the term “three days and three nights.” He cites as an example the statement of a well-known Rabbi that a portion of a day and a night is equivalent to the whole period.

However, although the term may be imprecise, one would expect it to be used to convey meaning in a straightforward way. Jesus clearly expected his opponents to understand his meaning, and that the unfolding events would bring to mind what he had said, and confirm his prediction. The

problem for us is that this particular chronology does not obviously confirm what Jesus said, and even the best arguments used in support are not particularly convincing. This surely cannot have been what Jesus had in mind.

Most scholars believe that this issue, although difficult, can be answered satisfactorily by assuming the phrase was an idiom, well known to Jesus' hearers. Nevertheless, in the absence of good evidence confirming this, we have to conclude that this issue presents a very serious challenge to this chronology.

Conclusion

This chronology conforms to a traditional view held by many Christians, and has had the support of a large body of scholars for many generations. Nevertheless it is challenged by serious issues that render it difficult to reconcile with the Biblical record.

3.2 Chronology B

The Last Supper was a Passover meal on Nisan 15; there were two Sabbaths on successive days.

	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
sunrise	Nisan 12	Nisan 13	Nisan 14	Nisan 15	Nisan 16	Nisan 17
				Trial of Jesus		Stone moved
				Crucifixion		Empty tomb visited
sunset			Passover slain	Jesus buried	Sabbath ends	
	Nisan 13	Nisan 14	Nisan 15	Nisan 16	Nisan 17	Nisan 18
			Last Supper	Sabbath starts	Jesus raised	

Diagram 2 – Chronology B

Features

- Passover lambs slain between 3 and 5 pm Thursday afternoon.
- Last Supper was the Passover meal.
- Arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus take place on the Feast Day Sabbath.
- Jesus buried for part of Nisan 15, all of Nisan 16 and part of Nisan 17 – a period encompassing at most two nights.

Issues

1. This chronology sets the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. But Matthew says the Jewish leaders had decided not to arrest and kill Jesus during the Feast (Matt 26:4,5).

Discussion

The leaders may have changed their minds, or merely been carried along by events. Although this raises a question, it does not present a conflict with the chronology.

2. This chronology sets the trial of Jesus after the slaying of the Passover lamb. But John tells us that during the trial of Jesus the Jewish leaders were still planning to eat the Passover, implying that the Passover lambs had not yet been slain.

“Then 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.” John 18:28

Discussion

It may be true that the most obvious meaning of “eat the Passover” is to eat the main Passover remembrance meal. Nevertheless the word “Passover” could be used generally to refer to the entire festival period. At that time it was the practice of the Jews to bring a peace offering, know as the Chagigah, optionally on Nisan 14 and compulsorily on Nisan 15. If offered, the first Chagigah on Nisan 14 formed part of the Passover meal. It is possible that the phrase “eat the Passover” used by John referred to the second Chagigah, offered on Nisan⁸. There is room for uncertainty here, and consequently we cannot definitely assert that John 18:28 disagrees with Chronology B.

3. John tells us that the Jews did not want the bodies of the crucified men to be on the crosses during the Sabbath, and so they deliberately ensured that the men died in plenty of time to remove their bodies. In the light of this it is inconceivable that the Jews would have crucified the men on the first day of the Feast, which was itself a Sabbath.

“Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down.” John 19:31

Discussion

Contrary to the view of some scholars, it is quite clear that the Jews were accustomed to the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread being described as a Sabbath day. The Pharisees and the Sadducees had a long-standing and bitter dispute over which day the Sheaf Offering should be presented. Leviticus 23:11 says that it should be on the day after the Sabbath. The Pharisees insisted that this meant the day after the first day of the Feast. The Sadducees argued that it should be the day after the normal weekly Sabbath. So, John’s use of the word “Sabbath” could refer to the last day of the week, or alternatively to the annual feast day. Either way Chronology B is seriously challenged. Even if it is reckoned that Jesus was a special case, and that his execution on the Feast day would have been acceptable, this would not apply to the two thieves crucified alongside him. This issue alone renders this chronology untenable.

4. Paul says, *“For Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed”* (1 Cor 5:7). It is hardly likely then that the death of Christ would be at any other time than when the Paschal lambs were being slaughtered.

Discussion

This is attractive, but not persuasive. One might similarly argue that since Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins then it is unlikely his death would be at any other time than that of the sacrificial offering on the Day of Atonement. Clearly we must understand typology in the light of events, not vice-versa.

5. Late on Sunday afternoon Cleopas and his companion said, “*It is now the third day since [literally ‘from which’] these things occurred*” (Luke 24:21). But under this chronology Sunday was only the second day since the crucifixion.

This issue was discussed under the previous chronology. It challenges this chronology, but does not definitely contradict it.

6. Jesus said that he would be in the grave for three days and three nights, and that this would be a sign to the Jewish leaders (Matt 12:40). But under this chronology Jesus was only in the grave for one day and two nights.

This issue was discussed under the previous chronology. It seriously challenges this chronology, but many consider there is an answer.

Conclusion

There are two issues with this chronology that challenge it, and another that cannot be satisfactorily resolved. It is doubtful whether this chronology is compatible with the Biblical record.

3.3 Chronology C

The Last Supper was eaten on Nisan 14, the evening before the Passover lambs were slain; there were two Sabbaths on successive days.

	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
sunrise	Nisan 12	Nisan 13	Nisan 14 Trial of Jesus	Nisan 15	Nisan 16	Nisan 17 Stone moved
			Crucifixion Passover slain Jesus buried	Feast Day Sabbath ends	Weekly Sabbath end	Empty tomb visited
sunset	Nisan 13	Nisan 14 Last Supper	Nisan 15 Feast Day Sabbath	Nisan 16 Weekly Sabbath	Nisan 17 Jesus raised	Nisan 18

Diagram 3 – Chronology C

Features

- Passover lambs slain between 3 and 5 pm Thursday afternoon.
- Last Supper eaten the day before, on Wednesday evening.
- Arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus takes place the day before the Feast Day Sabbath, on the day the Passover lambs were slain.
- Jesus buried for (possibly) part of Nisan 14, all of Nisan 15, all of Nisan 16 and part of Nisan 17 – a period encompassing three successive nights.

Issues

1. This chronology sets the Last Supper on the evening before the Passover lambs were slaughtered. But the Synoptic gospels describe the Last Supper as a Passover meal
This issue was discussed under Chronology A. It raises a serious question, but it is possible to interpret the Scripture passages in a way that is consistent with this chronology.

2. Jesus said that he would be in the grave for three days and three nights, and that this would be a sign to the Jewish leaders (Matt 12:40). But under this chronology Jesus was only in the grave for two days and three nights.

Discussion

It is entirely reasonable to interpret this term as meaning, “an unbroken period of time encompassing all or part of three consecutive calendar days, and including all or part of three consecutive nights.” Chronology C is quite consistent with this interpretation.

Jesus spoke many times to his disciples about his impending suffering, starting with his betrayal. He used these various other phrases to describe the length of time that would elapse before he was raised to life: “on the third day”, “after three days”, “three days later”, “in three days”. If one understands the commencement of this period to be the time of his betrayal and arrest then every one of these expressions is compatible with Chronology C.

Conclusion

Although there is an issue that raises a serious question, this question can be answered satisfactorily. The conclusion is that this Chronology is compatible with the Biblical record.

3.4 Chronology D

The Last Supper was eaten on Nisan 14, the evening before the Passover lambs were slain; there were two Sabbaths separated by a day.

	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
sunrise	Nisan 13	Nisan 14 Trial of Jesus	Nisan 15	Nisan 16	Nisan 17	Nisan 18 Stone moved
		Crucifixion Passover slain Jesus buried	Feast Day ends		Sabbath ends	Empty tomb visited
sunset	Nisan 14 Last Supper	Nisan 15 Feast Day Sabbath	Nisan 16	Nisan 17 Weekly Sabbath	Nisan 18 Jesus raised	Nisan 19

Diagram 4 – Chronology D

Features

- Passover lamb slain between 3 and 6 pm Wednesday afternoon.
- Last Supper eaten the day before, on Tuesday evening.
- Arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus takes place the day before the Feast Day Sabbath, on the day the Passover lambs were slaughtered.
- Jesus raised at the transition from the Sabbath to the first day of the week.
- Jesus buried for all of Nisan 15, all of Nisan 16 and all of Nisan 17 – a period encompassing exactly three days and three nights.

Issues

1. This chronology sets the Last Supper on the evening before the Passover lambs were slaughtered. But the Synoptic gospels describe the Last Supper as a Passover meal.

This issue was discussed under Chronology A. It raises a serious question, but it is possible to interpret the Scripture passages in a way that is consistent with this chronology.

2. Late on Sunday afternoon Cleopas and his companion said, "*It is now the third day since [literally 'from which'] these things occurred*" (Luke 24:21). But under this chronology Sunday was the fourth day since the crucifixion.

Discussion

This issue was also discussed under Chronology A. It seriously challenges this chronology. Interestingly, all of the other phrases Jesus used to describe the period of time that he would be in the grave fit with this chronology, provided the commencement of this period is taken as the time of his burial, and provided he rose at the end of the weekly Sabbath.

3. The women went to the tomb early on the first day of the week intending to anoint the body for burial (Luke 24:1). Under this chronology such an act does not make sense, because (1) there was plenty of opportunity to do this on Friday Nisan 16, and (2) by the fourth day they would not have wanted to remove the stone because of the expectation of a bad odour (cf John 11:39).

Discussion

It is difficult to answer this point. Although the women's actions do not directly contradict this chronology, they render it extremely unlikely.

Conclusion

There is one issue with this chronology that cannot be satisfactorily resolved, and another that makes it very unlikely. It is doubtful whether this chronology is compatible with the Biblical record.

3.5 Chronology E

Days are reckoned from sunrise to sunrise. The Last Supper was a Passover meal on Nisan 14; the Feast Day Sabbath and the weekly Sabbath overlapped.

	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
sunrise	Nisan 11	Nisan 12	Nisan 13	Nisan 14 Trial of Jesus	Nisan 15	Nisan 16 Stone moved
sunset	Nisan 12	Nisan 13	Nisan 14 Passover slain	Nisan 15 Feast Day Crucifixion Jesus buried	Nisan 16 Sabbath ends	Nisan 17 Empty tomb visited
			Last Supper	Sabbath starts	Jesus raised	

Diagram 5 – Chronology E

Features

- Days reckoned from sunrise to sunrise.
- Passover lambs slain between 3 and 5 pm Thursday afternoon.
- Last Supper was the Passover meal on Thursday evening.
- Arrest and trial of Jesus takes place on Nisan 14.
- Crucifixion of Jesus takes place on the Feast Day Sabbath, Nisan 15.
- Weekly Sabbath overlaps Nisan 15 and Nisan 16.
- Jesus buried for half of Nisan 15, and most of Nisan 16 – a period encompassing roughly two nights and a day.

Issues

1. Late on Sunday afternoon Cleopas and his companion said, “*It is now the third day since [literally ‘from which’] these things occurred*” (Luke 24:21). But under this chronology Sunday was only the second day since the crucifixion.

This was discussed under Chronology A. It is a serious objection to this chronology, too, but it can be resolved.

2. Jesus said that he would be in the grave for three days and three nights, and that this would be a sign to the Jewish leaders (Matt 12:40). But under this chronology Jesus was only in the grave for one day and two nights.

This was discussed under Chronology A. It is a serious objection to this chronology, too.

3. This chronology sets the crucifixion of Jesus on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. But Matthew says the Jewish leaders had decided not to arrest and kill Jesus during the Feast (Matt 26:4,5).

This was discussed under Chronology B. It is not a significant objection.

4. This chronology sets the trial of Jesus after the slaying of the Passover lamb. But John tells us that during the trial of Jesus the Jewish leaders were still planning to eat the Passover, implying that the Passover lambs had not yet been slain (John 18:28).

This was discussed under Chronology B. We cannot definitely conclude that the text contradicts this chronology.

5. John tells us that the Jews did not want the bodies of the crucified men to be on the crosses during the Sabbath, and so they deliberately ensured that the men died in plenty of time to remove their bodies. In the light of this it is inconceivable that the Jews would have crucified the men on the first day of the Feast, which was itself a Sabbath.

This was discussed under Chronology B. It is a serious challenge to this chronology, too.

6. Paul says, “*For Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed*” (1 Cor 5:7). It is hardly likely then that the death of Christ would be at any other time than when the Paschal lambs were being slaughtered.

This was discussed under Chronology B. It is an attractive argument, but is not persuasive.

Conclusion

There are issues with this chronology, one of which cannot be satisfactorily resolved. It is doubtful whether this chronology is compatible with the Biblical record.

3.6 Overall Conclusion

The overall conclusion of this analysis is that Chronology C fits satisfactorily with the Biblical account. Chronology A could also be said to fit, but it is very difficult to reconcile it with the phrase “three days and three nights.” This difficulty is compounded by the fact that Jesus used this phrase to authenticate the Easter events, whereas from our perspective it appears to do the opposite for Chronology A.

4. Narrowing the Options

The options could be narrowed considerably if we knew precisely which year Jesus was crucified, because this would help to fix the day of the week on which Nisan 14 fell (assuming that the daylight portion of the weekly Jewish Sabbath fell on a Saturday).

4.1 Determining the Commencement of the Month Nisan

At this time Nisan 1 was primarily determined by the observation of the new moon during the day before. We can now fix the times

and dates of the new moons very precisely, using astronomical data and calculation, and this should help us considerably. However, there is still some uncertainty. First of all, the temple observers had to be able to see the new moon in order to fix the first day of the month. If the sky was overcast during the preceding hours then the start of the month might be delayed by a day. Such a delay was at most for one day, and then only if the delay did not cause the previous month to exceed 30 days.

Secondly, we are not entirely sure how the temple authorities at the time of Jesus fixed the start and finish of a day of the month. We are fairly sure that they did not use the Roman system, which we use now, of a midnight to midnight reckoning. (John used the Roman clock in John 19:14.) The two possibilities are (1) a sacred day running from sunset to sunset; (2) a working day running from sunrise to sunrise. The former, of course, is used to define the Jewish Sabbath, and this itself would be a strong incentive to use the same system for the numbering of days in the month. The latter system was used by the Jews for their clock (cf Mark 15:25,33). This, too, would have encouraged them to use a compatible system for their day numbering.

Thirdly, the Jews used leap-months to re-calibrate their calendar year to the solar cycle. This happened on average every 2.9 years. If the new moon at the end of Adar, the last month of the sacred year, occurred very early in spring, and in particular before the barley harvest was ripe, then a leap-month could be inserted first, effectively postponing Nisan for 29 or 30 days. Since this depended partly on the state of the late-winter weather it is not possible for us to tell purely by numerical calculation if a particular year was designated a leap-year.

In spite of the uncertainties, knowing the year of the crucifixion would help considerably in understanding the chronology of the Easter events.

4.2 The Year of the Crucifixion

The New Testament states that the crucifixion took place whilst Pontius Pilate was Governor of Judea. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*¹⁰, Pilate was Governor of Judea from AD 26 to AD 36. This constrains the possibilities for the year of the crucifixion, but it should be possible to reduce the set of possible years even further.

In the revised edition of the *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* Finegan¹¹ concludes that AD 33 is the best estimate of the year of the crucifixion using the evidence currently available to us. Another possibility, but less likely, is AD 30.

Many scholars have used astronomical calculations of the occurrence of new moons to estimate when the month of Nisan was likely to occur between AD 26 and AD 36. In 1985 Humphreys and Waddington¹² performed precise calculations of lunar crescent visibility (the new moon itself is invisible) to determine as accurately as possible the most probable day for the start of Nisan, and hence Nisan 14, Passover day. The results of their calculations are reproduced in the following table. In this table the Julian date given is for the day for which the daylight hours overlap with Nisan 14.

YEAR AD	14 Nisan		Chronology
	Probable Date	Possible Date	
26	Sunday April 21		
27	Thursday April 10	Friday April 11	B, C, E (maybe A)
28	Tuesday March 30		
29	Monday April 18	Sunday April 17	
30	Friday April 7	Thursday April 6	A
31	Tuesday March 27		
32	Sunday April 13	Monday April 14	
33	Friday April 3		A
34	Wednesday March 24		D
35	Tuesday April 12		
36	Saturday March 31		

Diagram 6 – Humphreys & Waddington Nisan 14 dates

These dates essentially agree with those published by Doig¹³, based on Schoch's tables of new moon dates.

It can immediately be seen that only AD 27, AD 30, AD 33 fit with chronologies A and C

5. Narrowing the Options Further

We could narrow the options further if we could place some constraints on the year of the commencement of Jesus' ministry.

5.1 Luke's Reference to Tiberius Caesar

Luke tells us that John the Baptist began to preach in the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar (Luke 3:1). Soon after this Jesus also began his ministry, being about 30 years old (Luke 3:23). We know that John

was about six months older than Jesus (Luke 1:36). It is considered likely that both John and Jesus commenced their public ministries on, or very soon after, their 30th birthdays, to conform with the pattern that was set for the Levites in Numbers 4. It seems very likely that John, at least, would have adopted this pattern. However, there is no explicit statement to this effect in Scripture, so it must be treated cautiously.

Tiberius Caesar became Roman emperor when his predecessor, Augustus Caesar, died on 19th August, AD 14. He reigned until his own death on 16th March, AD 37. There is some evidence that there was a period of time before AD 14 when Tiberius was co-regent with Augustus. Consequently there is debate as to when Luke might have considered the reign of Tiberius to have commenced, whether AD 14 or the beginning of the co-regency. Luke seems to take great care in fixing the date of the commencement of John's ministry very precisely in both the Roman and Judean calendars (Luke 3:1,2). He is also writing for a Greek or Roman readership (Luke 1:3,4). It would be strange, then, if he used an unconventional method of dating.

Most of the historical and archaeological evidence supports the view that Tiberius' reign commenced on 19th August AD 14. This is a crucial anchor point for mapping the chronology of the life of Jesus, as described in the New Testament, onto secular history. If this date is wrong, as some claim that it is, then it may imply that Jesus commenced his ministry possible three years earlier than we otherwise conclude.

5.2 Counting the Years of Tiberius' Reign

We do not know what method of counting Luke used for the years of Tiberius' reign. Any of the following are possibilities.

Roman Regnal year reckoning (RR)

This reckoning counts the first year of Tiberius' reign as 19th August AD 14 to 18th August AD 15. By this reckoning the 15th year is from 19th August AD 28 to 18th August AD 29.

Roman Calendar year reckoning (RC)

This reckoning counts Roman calendar years, where a calendar year runs from 1st January to 31st December. There are two variants. In the first (RC1), known as the accession year system, 19th August AD 14 to 31st December AD 14 is described as the accession year. The following year, 1st January AD 15 to 31st December AD 15, is described as the first year. By this reckoning the 15th year is from 1st January AD 29 to 31st December AD 29.

In the second variant (RC2), known as the non-accession year system, 19th August AD 14 to 31st December AD 14 is described as the first year. By this reckoning the 15th year is from 1st January AD 28 to 31st December AD 28.

Judean/Syrian Civil Calendar year reckoning (JC)

This reckoning counts Judean/Syrian civil calendar years, where a calendar year runs from 1st Tishri to 29th or 30th Elul. In AD 14 1st Tishri was 13th September in the Julian calendar. Again, there are two variants. In the first (JC1), 19th August AD 14 to 12th September AD 14 is the accession year. The following year, 13th September AD 14 to 1st September AD 15, is the first year. By this reckoning the 15th year is from 9th September AD 28 to 26th September AD 29.

In the second variant (JC2), 19th August AD 14 to 12th September AD 14 is the first year. By this reckoning the 15th year is from 20th September AD 27 to 8th September AD 28.

Judean Sacred Year reckoning

There is one other possibility for counting years, and this is using Jewish sacred years, which run from 1st Nisan to 29th or 30th Adar. It is very unlikely that Luke used this system when counting the years of a Roman emperor, given the Greek/Roman readership for whom he was writing. For this reason this method of counting has not been considered further.

Depending on the method of counting used by Luke, the 15th year of Tiberius' reign lies somewhere between 20th September AD 27 and 31st December AD 29, as shown in the following diagram.

	RR	RC1	RC2	JC1	JC2
27 AD					20 th Sep
28 AD	19 th Aug		1 st Jan 31 st Dec	9 th Sep	8 th Sep
29 AD	18 th Aug	1 st Jan 31 st Dec		26 th Sep	

Diagram 7 – 15th Year of Tiberius Caesar

5.3 The Commencement and Length of Jesus' Ministry

The 15th year of Tiberius provides us with an approximate date for the commencement of John's ministry. According to Luke, Jesus commenced his ministry after John did: his ministry started when he was baptised by John in the river Jordan (Luke 3:21-23). We have no explicit statement precisely how long John had been preaching before Jesus was baptised. If the suggestion is correct that both men commenced their ministries close to their 30th birthdays then the gap was about six months.

It would be reasonable to conclude that Jesus commenced his ministry in the second half of AD 29. This is a date supported by Hoehner⁴, after considering carefully the various options.

There is a considerable body of scholarship that estimates the length of Jesus' ministry to be about 3.5 years. This is well argued by Hoehner⁵ as being the best possible understanding from the gospel record. If so, and assuming that Jesus commenced his ministry six months after John the Baptist, the crucifixion of Jesus took place between 6th September AD 31 and 31st December AD 33, i.e. at Passover in AD 32 or Passover in AD 33. If Jesus' ministry was shorter than 3.5 years then the crucifixion may have been as early as AD 31 or even AD 30.

Referring back to the astronomical calculations of Humphreys and Waddington¹² it seems that AD 27 has to be ruled out of contention as the year of the crucifixion. This also means that Chronology C is ruled out, even though it seems to give the best agreement with the New Testament record. Consequently we are left with strong support for AD 33, with a possibility of AD 30. In both cases Chronology A applies.

6. Implications of an AD 33 Crucifixion

If the crucifixion was in AD 33 then this raises some interesting points. Firstly, Humphreys and Waddington have demonstrated that there was a lunar eclipse at sunset in Jerusalem on Nisan 14 that year, which gives interesting insight into Peter's sermon at Pentecost. Secondly it means that the Last Supper must have taken place the day before the majority of Jews ate the Passover meal. What kind of meal, then, was the Last Supper? Thirdly, it means that the birth of Jesus was very likely in 2 BC, rather than the more traditional date of 4 BC or earlier.

6.1 The Lunar Eclipse on Nisan 14 AD 33

The astronomical calculations carried out by Humphreys and Waddington¹² included a search for lunar eclipses visible from

Jerusalem. They determined that there was only one lunar eclipse visible from Jerusalem at Passover time during the years AD 26 to AD 36. This occurred from 3.40 pm until 6.50 pm on Friday 3rd April AD 33. During the first part of the eclipse, from 3.40 pm until 6.20 pm, the moon was below the horizon. At moonrise (6.20 pm) 20% of the moon was eclipsed, and this eclipsed portion would have dominated the appearance of the moon as it rose. Typically in such eclipses the eclipsed portion is coloured blood-red.

As Humphreys and Waddington point out, the Jews would have been taking note of sunset and moonrise that evening, in order to determine the precise commencement of the Feast day. Consequently the eclipse of the moon and its blood-red appearance would have been noted and discussed, particularly coming so soon after the darkening of the sun from 12 noon to 3 pm (Luke 23:44,45). In view of this Peter's words on the Day of Pentecost take on much greater significance: "*The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord,*" (Acts 2:20).

Interestingly this eclipse was known about before the work of Humphreys and Waddington was published, but it was thought that none of the eclipse was visible from Jerusalem. Only by taking into account more recent understanding of changes in the earth's rate of rotation has it become apparent that the eclipse was indeed evident to the people in Jerusalem.

6.2 Was the Last Supper a Passover Meal?

The answer to this question radically affects our understanding of the timing of events during Passion week. For Chronology A or C to be correct either the answer to this question is "No," or Jesus celebrated the Passover the evening before many of the other Jews.

Some have asserted that the Last Supper was not a Passover meal, because it was at the wrong time, and use for support the fact that there is no mention of the eating of a lamb. But this conclusion is

impossible to reconcile with a straightforward reading of the following portion of Luke's narrative.

Then came the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover."

"Where do you want us to prepare for it?" they asked.

He replied, "As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters, and say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large upper room, all furnished. Make preparations there." They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." (Luke 22: 7-15)

Clearly Luke intended his readers to understand that this supper was indeed a celebration of the Passover. Is it possible that Jesus and his disciples ate the Passover meal twenty four hours before other Jews did so?

Hoehner⁶ considers a number of different possibilities that might give rise to the Passover lambs being sacrificed on different days by different groups. These include: the possibility that the Pharisees and the Sadducees disagreed about the day on which the month Nisan commenced; the possibility that the number of sacrifices was too many to be completed in one afternoon; and the possibility that the 24-hour day was defined differently by different groups.

Hoehner favours the last of these, noting that also it would have provided a practical solution to the problem of coping with the total number of sacrifices. (If Josephus¹⁴ is correct, about 256,500 Paschal lambs were typically sacrificed.) The reasoning is based on the claim that many Galileans considered the day to run from sunrise to sunrise, whereas the Judeans reckoned from sunset to sunset. So the Galileans could have reckoned that Nisan 14 started

at sunrise on Thursday, twelve hours before the Judeans reckoned the day to start. If this was so then the Galileans would have sacrificed the Paschal lamb during the afternoon of **their** Nisan 14, which actually was Nisan 13 from the Judean perspective.

There is, however, a major objection to this view, which effectively renders it untenable if AD 33 was indeed the year of the crucifixion. Doig¹³ calculates that the visible crescent of the new moon could not have been seen before 7.16 am on Friday March 20th, AD 33. This was after sunrise. Consequently the Judeans would have designated sunset Friday March 20th as the start of Nisan 1, whereas the Galileans would have waited until sunrise Saturday March 21st. Therefore in AD 33 the Galileans would have commenced Nisan 14 at sunrise on Friday, not sunrise on Thursday.

Marshall⁷ also conducts an extensive analysis, and supports the view that the Passover lambs were sacrificed on two successive days. However, he is more guarded about the reason for this, merely concluding that it arose from Jewish differences about the calendar.

There is another possible explanation for Jesus and His disciples eating the Passover meal twenty four hours before everyone else. It is possible that Jesus alone correctly interpreted the requirements of the Law of Moses regarding precisely when the Passover lamb should be slain. It could be that He alone understood that the slaying of the Passover lamb was intended to be at the beginning of Nisan 14, not at the end.

With regard to the time of day that the Passover lamb should be slain, Exodus 12:6 and Leviticus 23:5 say that it should be at twilight on Nisan 14, and Deuteronomy 16:6 says it should be in the evening, at sunset. The word 'twilight' literally translates "between the evenings." The Rev. Dr. Edersheim⁹ says that this phrase means "between the darkness of the gloaming and that of the night". If we assume a sunset to sunset definition of a day, the question is, which end of the day Nisan 14 was the lamb to be

sacrificed: as darkness set in at the beginning of the day, or just before darkness set in at the end of the day?

We know that the Jews at the time of Jesus interpreted the phrase “between the evenings” to mean “late afternoon”. Josephus¹⁴ tells us that the Passover lambs were sacrificed between 3 pm and 5 pm. The problem with this is that although the Passover sacrifice was made on Nisan 14, the Passover meal was not eaten until Nisan 15, and the commemoration of the Lord’s Passover itself (God’s passing over the homes marked with blood) was at midnight on Nisan 15. This sits uneasily with the instruction in Numbers 28:16-17, “*On the fourteenth day of the first month the Lord’s Passover is to be held. On the fifteenth day of this month there is to be a festival: for seven days eat bread without yeast.*” These verses appear to place the commemoration of Passover on Nisan 14, and to separate it quite distinctly from the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread on Nisan 15.

The Encyclopedia Judaica¹⁹ throws some interesting light on this question. It tells us that in the early history of the Jewish nation, right up to the Babylonian exile, the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were separate festivals. After the exile they were combined.

It could be, then, that the long-standing Jewish tradition of killing the Passover lamb before sunset at the end of Nisan 14, and eating the Passover meal after sunset at the beginning of Nisan 15, is in conflict with the original instructions given by God through Moses. If so then it would not be surprising if Jesus kept to a different chronology. Note that under the Law of Moses there was no requirement for a priest to officiate when the Passover lamb was slain, so there was no legal impediment to Jesus and his disciples celebrating the Passover themselves at a time that was different to other Jews.

Even if the Jews were sacrificing the Passover lamb at the wrong time of day, if either of chronologies A or C applied they were in fact still sacrificing it on Nisan 14, as the Law stipulated. If

anything was out of line with the Law it was their eating of the Passover meal on Nisan 15 instead of Nisan 14.

An interesting perspective on this issue is suggested by the three hours of darkness from 12 noon to 3 pm. Mark seems to say that Jesus died at the end of this period (Mark 15:33-38). If so then his final hours of agony and death were completed under the cover of darkness. It would be entirely fitting, then, if God intended the sacrificing of the Passover lambs, foreshadowing his sacrifice, to be carried out in darkness too.

6.3 The Birth of Jesus

If Jesus did indeed commence his ministry at the age of 30 in AD 28 or 29 then this implies he was born in 2 or 3 BC. This is later than the date of about 5 BC favoured by many scholars. Interestingly, it agrees with the statements of a significant number of the early Church fathers who lived in the 2nd or 3rd centuries AD.

One of the main reasons for favouring a date before 4 BC for the birth of Jesus is the estimate that Herod the Great died in 4 BC (Herod was in power when Jesus was born). This essentially follows a chronology obtained by piecing together various statements by the historian Josephus. But possibly the strongest argument is that Herod's sons dated their reigns from 4 BC.

Josephus¹⁵ tells us that Herod was elected to be King of the Jews by the Roman Senate. This took place in 40 BC, the year when Calvinus and Pollio were consuls. When speaking of Herod's death Josephus¹⁶ said that he had reigned thirty-seven years since he was declared to be king by the Romans. This suggests a date of 4 BC for Herod's death, if one counts 40 BC as his first year.

In the same place Josephus also tells us that Herod had reigned 34 years since the death of Antigonus. Antigonus was the ruler in Jerusalem at the time Herod was elected to be king, and Herod had to lay siege to Jerusalem in order to seize the throne from Antigonus. This siege was at summer time during a Jewish sabbatical year¹⁷. The defeat of Jerusalem took place 27 years to the

day after Pompey had defeated Jerusalem. Pompey's victory had been in 63 BC, which places Herod's in 36 BC, probably in September on the Day of Atonement.

Given that we know the siege of Jerusalem took place during the summer of a sabbatical year, this should enable us to fix the date very precisely. Unfortunately historians are unsure which of two alternative tables to accept for the list sabbatical years – that of Zuckerman or that of Wacholder²⁰. Zuckerman dates the sabbatical year in the summer of 37 BC, Wacholder in the summer of 36 BC. This leaves us uncertain as to which of these two years the overthrow of Jerusalem took place. However, the link with Pompey's defeat of Jerusalem strongly suggests 36 BC.

Antigonus was taken away captive by Sosius, and subsequently killed. However, he was not killed straight away. We do not know how much time elapsed, but it may have been a few weeks or even months. Assuming Antigonus died in late 36 BC / early 35 BC then Herod's death 34 years later took place in late 2 BC / early 1 BC.

Joesphus¹⁸ also tells us that Herod died between an eclipse of the moon and Passover. There are two eclipses that are generally considered to be possibilities: March 13th 4 BC and January 10th 1 BC. More recently Pratt²¹ has presented an argument for a date of December 29th 1 BC.

In conclusion, there are strong arguments to support a date of early 1 BC, or later, for the death of Herod the Great, and consequently this makes a date of 3 or 2 BC quite plausible for the birth of Jesus. This agrees with the chronology recently summarised by Finegan¹¹.

7. Conclusion

The gospel narratives of the Passion Week seem to fit best with a chronology in which the crucifixion took place on 14th Nisan, in a year in which the daylight portion of this date fell on a Thursday. Computed new moon tables for the years in which Pontius Pilate held power show that in only one year was this possible – AD 27. However, this year is extremely difficult to reconcile with the other

historical anchor-points in the gospel narratives, and consequently this chronology has to be considered unlikely.

The more traditional chronology, in which Nisan 14 and the crucifixion occur on a Friday, can be seen to fit with the gospel record, provided the various phrases used to describe the length of Jesus' death and burial are understood idiomatically. Computed new moon tables show that this chronology was possible in AD 30 and in AD 33, and of these AD 33 in particular fits well with other historical events identified by the gospel writers.

In time it may happen that historians revise their best estimates of the significant dates in the lives of Tiberius Caesar and Herod the Great. If so then a Thursday may become a serious contender for the day of the crucifixion. Unless and until this happens the best understanding is that the crucifixion occurred on a Friday.

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