

Title: Understanding the Timing of the Passover: Christ's Last Supper vs. the Biblical Command

Rick Matthews

Introduction The timing of the Passover meal and Christ's Last Supper has long been a topic of debate among believers. A proper understanding of the biblical timing and Christ's actions before His crucifixion helps clarify what He did, why He did it, and how the early disciples responded. This article explores the Torah's commanded timing for the Passover, Christ's fulfillment of it, and whether His disciples continued to keep it according to the 14th or adopted other practices.

1. The Torah Command for Passover Timing The original Passover instructions are clear:

"In the fourteenth day of the first month at even is the LORD'S Passover." — *Leviticus 23:5*

"And ye shall keep it up until the fourteenth day of the same month: and the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it in the evening [Hebrew: *ben ha-arbayim* — between the evenings]." — *Exodus 12:6*

"And they shall eat the flesh in that night, roast with fire, and unleavened bread; and with bitter herbs they shall eat it." — *Exodus 12:8*

According to Scripture:

- The lamb was to be slain on the **14th**, in the **late afternoon**.
- It was to be **eaten that night**, which would be the **start of the 15th** (biblical days begin at sunset).

This places the commanded Passover meal **after sunset on the 14th**, at the beginning of the **15th of Abib/Nisan**.

2. The Timing of Christ's Last Supper Christ's final meal with His disciples occurred **at the beginning of the 14th**, after sunset on what we would call the 13th day:

"Then came the day of unleavened bread, when the Passover must be killed. And he sent Peter and John, saying, Go and prepare us the Passover, that we may eat." — *Luke 22:7-8*

"And when the hour was come, he sat down, and the twelve apostles with him... And he said unto them, With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." — *Luke 22:14-15*

However, Christ was crucified the following morning:

“It was the preparation of the Passover, and about the sixth hour: and he saith unto the Jews, Behold your King!” — *John 19:14*

This confirms that He had His meal **before the actual slaying of the Passover lambs**, which would occur later that 14th day, near twilight.

3. What Was Christ Observing? Because Christ would be dead before the official Passover meal (end of 14th/start of 15th), He observed a **symbolic meal** with His disciples. This was not the traditional Passover meal with lamb, but rather a covenant meal with **unleavened bread and wine**, introducing the New Covenant symbols:

“And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it... This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.” — *Luke 22:19*

“Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.” — *Luke 22:20*

This meal was **not in accordance with the commanded timing of the lamb-based Passover**, but was intentionally held early to introduce the **symbols of His coming sacrifice**.

4. Did the Disciples Continue to Keep the 14th? Historical records show that the apostles, particularly John, and those they taught, continued to keep the Passover on the 14th. This tradition is known as **Quartodecimanism** (from the Latin *quartodecimus*, meaning "fourteenth").

“We observe the exact day; neither adding nor taking away. For in Asia also great lights have fallen asleep... John, who was both a witness and a teacher, who reclined upon the bosom of the Lord... all these observed the fourteenth day of the Passover according to the Gospel, deviating in no respect.” — *Polycrates of Ephesus, as quoted by Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 5.24.2–7*

Early Christian leaders such as **Polycarp** (a disciple of John) and **Polycrates** maintained the practice of observing the 14th as the memorial of Christ’s death.

“For neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp to forgo the observance in his own way, inasmuch as these things had been observed by John the disciple of our Lord, and by other apostles with whom he had associated.” — *Irenaeus, as quoted by Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 5.24.16*

“I, therefore, brethren, who have lived sixty-five years in the Lord, and have met with the brethren throughout the world... always observed the day when the people put away the leaven.” — *Polycrates of Ephesus, 2nd century letter*

5. No Scriptural Evidence for a Change in Timing There is no biblical record that Christ changed the date of the Passover or annulled the commanded timing of the meal. While He did introduce **bread and wine** as symbolic elements of the New Covenant during His final meal, He made no statement altering the timing or sequence of the commanded observance. This is significant:

- **The original command** was never revoked.
- **Christ Himself said**, “Do this in remembrance of Me,” referring to the symbols — not a change in the timing of the Passover meal.

Additional scriptural support:

- **Matthew 5:17–18** — “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.”
- **1 Corinthians 5:7–8** — “For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us: therefore let us keep the feast...”
- **John 13:1** — “Now before the feast of the Passover...”

6. Implications for Modern Observance Those who seek to follow the example of both Scripture and the early disciples should recognize:

- The **commanded Passover meal**, involving the lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs, is to be kept **at the end of the 14th**, going into the 15th.
- Christ introduced **bread and wine** as memorial symbols, which can be included in the Passover meal without replacing or altering the original command.
- Early believers such as John, Polycarp, and Polycrates **continued to observe the 14th** in remembrance of Christ’s death, without adopting Roman or Rabbinical changes.

Modern observance, therefore, should reflect:

1. **The timing** — keeping the memorial on the 14th as a day of solemn observance.
2. **The symbols** — incorporating the bread and wine as Christ instituted.
3. **The purpose** — focusing on the remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice as the fulfillment of the Passover lamb.
4. **The apostolic example** — retaining fidelity to the practices of the apostles and their direct disciples.

Summary Table: Timing Distinctions in Passover Observance

| Event | Date/Time (Biblical) | Notes |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Torah Passover Meal | End of 14th / Start of 15th | Lamb eaten at night after twilight |
| Christ's Last Supper | Start of 14th | No lamb, early covenant meal |
| Christ's Crucifixion | Daytime of 14th | Fulfilled the role of Passover Lamb |

Conclusion Scripture shows that the commanded Passover meal was to be eaten at the end of the 14th, after the lamb was slain — at the start of the 15th. Christ, knowing He would be sacrificed during the daytime of the 14th, held a covenant meal with new symbols on the evening that began the 14th. The apostles, particularly John, continued to honor the 14th — not by changing the command, but by commemorating the day of Christ's death. This distinction is critical for those seeking to understand and observe the Passover according to both Scripture and historical apostolic tradition.

Citations:

- Exodus 12:6–8; Leviticus 23:5; Numbers 28:16–17
- Luke 22:7–20; John 13:1; John 19:14
- Matthew 5:17–18; 1 Corinthians 5:7–8
- Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.24.2–7, 5.24.16
- Polycrates of Ephesus, Letter to Victor