

Did Jesus Christ change the time of the Passover?

Many - perhaps most - Church of God members believe that the New Testament Passover should be kept at the beginning of Nisan 14. Yet some say that, on the night before His death, Jesus changed the time that Passover was to be kept - that He changed it from the end of Nisan 14 to the beginning. Some say that He changed it from the time that God originally instituted it. Some say that He brought it forward that particular year because He knew that he would not be able to keep it at its "proper time" - at the end of Nisan 14. Some say that He and His disciples did not eat the traditional Passover lamb dinner that night. Some say...

But what does God's Word say?

Herbert W. Armstrong often advised his listeners, "Don't believe me... believe the Word of God... Check it out and prove it from your own Bible!" I ask you do the same as you read this. The purpose of this article is to attempt to clarify what God's Word says about this controversial subject.

When did the first Passover take place?

While they were still in Egypt, God gave the Israelites some detailed instructions about how, when and where they were to keep the Passover. God, through Moses, documented most of these details in the twelfth chapter of Exodus:

Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month they shall take every man a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household; and if the household is too small for a lamb, then a man and his neighbour next to his house shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old; you shall take it from the sheep or from the goats. (Exodus 12:3-5: RSV throughout)

On the tenth day of the first month (which is six times called "Abib" in the Old Testament and "Nisan" twice) each family was to take an unblemished lamb (young sheep) or kid (young goat). Notice that it was each *family* that was to choose, kill and prepare its own lamb - not the priests. At that point in time, the Levitical priesthood did not yet exist. We will return to this point later. Continuing in chapter 12 of the book of Exodus:

And you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs in the evening. (Verse 6)

Precisely when on the fourteenth day of the first month was the Passover lamb to be killed? The answer to this question revolves around the words "in the evening." But which evening? The one that begins Abib 14? Or the one that ends Abib 14? Controversy has raged regarding this question for thousands of years. Passover keepers were arguing about it during Jesus Christ's human lifetime.

Before we go on, we should remind ourselves that God's days begin and end at sunset, not at midnight:

God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day... And God called the firmament Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day... And there was evening and there was morning, a third day... And there was evening and there was morning, a fourth day... And there was evening and there was morning, a fifth day... And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day. (Genesis 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31)

It shall be to you a sabbath of solemn rest, and you shall afflict yourselves; on the ninth day of the month beginning at evening, from evening to evening shall you keep your sabbath. (Leviticus 23:32).

It is generally agreed that the phrase "in the evening" (Hebrew: *beyn ha arbayim*) in Exodus 12:6 should be more accurately worded "between the evenings." Still, opinions differ even what the phrase "between the evenings" means. One group feels that the phrase "between the evenings" means at a point in time between the sunset that begins Abib 14 and the sunset that begins Abib 15 and, therefore, that the lambs were to be killed toward the end of Abib 14. The other camp says that the phrase means "between sunset and dark"... at the beginning of Abib 14. Despite these translation difficulties, the contexts of many other verses strongly suggest that the lamb was to be killed, cooked and eaten at the *beginning* of Abib 14. Here are those verses:

Israelites not to go out on Passover night

**And you shall let none of it remain until the morning, anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. In this manner you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD's passover.
(Exodus 12:10-11)**

Here we see that God instructed them to eat the Passover meal "in haste"... translated from the Hebrew noun *chippazown*. A better translation of *chippazown* is "in trepidation" - trepidation regarding the terrifying events of the coming night. Also, they were to eat their meal "with their loins girded"... translated from the Hebrew words *mothen chagar*. We have always thought of this phrase as an instruction to be fully dressed and ready to travel. But there is an alternate translation that is worth considering: that the Israelites were "to be afraid in their loins." This rendering dovetails with the aspect of trepidation. A common symptom of fear is that of stomach upset - the severity of which depends on the level of fear experienced.

The main point in this verse, however is that the Israelites were expected still to be in their homes the following morning after eating the first Passover meal. If they had already started their journey out of Egypt during the Passover night, it is doubtful that God would have expected them to have taken the uneaten remains of their Passover lambs with them to burn when the morning arrived. Considering all the detail He went into to instruct them in other points regarding Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread observance - if this is what He wanted, He would have told them so. Also, we know, from verse 46, that this is *not* what God wanted! He commanded them *not* to take any of the remains of the lamb meat outside their houses:

In one house shall it be eaten; you shall not carry forth any of the flesh outside the house; and you shall not break a bone of it.

In verse 22 of this same chapter, God - through Moses - commanded the Israelites to remain in their homes until the morning:

Take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood which is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood which is in the basin; and none of you shall go out of the door of his house until the morning.

Out by night

We can be absolutely sure, then, that the Israelites did not leave Egypt on the Passover night. But doesn't Deuteronomy 16:1 tell us that God brought the Israelites out of Egypt by night? Yes, it does:

... in the month of Abib the LORD your God brought you out of Egypt by night.

But *which* night did God bring them out of Egypt? Verses 10 and 22 have already shown us that it cannot have been Passover night. Numbers 33:3 tells us that the Israelites left Egypt on the night of Abib 15:

They set out from Rameses in the first month, on the fifteenth day of the first month; on the day after the Passover the people of Israel went out triumphantly in the sight of all the Egyptians,

The Israelites left Egypt on the night that began Abib 15. In God's method of calculating terrestrial time, each 24-hour day contains only one night... at its beginning. The daytime portion of Abib 15 was the day after Passover day. The nighttime portion of Abib 15 was the night after that of Abib 14. The first Passover, therefore, occurred during the night that began Abib 14.

For other additional, logical reasons, the Israelites could not have left Egypt the same night that they kept the Passover. The multiple journeys of Pharaoh's messengers and those of Moses and Aaron between Goshen and Rameses and the Israelites' despoiling of the Egyptians (Exodus 12:31-36) could not have all been fitted into one night, especially considering the relative slowness of the modes of transportation of that time.

All of the Passover Ceremony to be Kept on Abib 14

It has been said that, because the priests of later years had so many Passover lambs to kill, if the Passover were to be kept at the beginning of the fourteenth, all the lambs would have to be killed at the end of the thirteenth. But this assumption is based on the later tradition that the priests were to perform the slaughtering at the temple, rather than on God's commandment that the heads of each household should kill the lambs at their homes (Exodus 12:3-6). Transferring the Passover service to the temple would disqualify those who were unable to make the trip to Jerusalem from keeping one of the most solemn ceremonies of the Israelites' year.

In later times, when the priests were erroneously killing the lambs at the end of the fourteenth, their Passover would be eaten at the beginning of the fifteenth. It makes sense that the Passover ceremony should be kept on the same night that the original *passing over* took place. Many scriptures specifically instruct that the Passover - all of it; the Bible nowhere specifies just the first part of it - should be kept on the fourteenth:

In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening, is the LORD's passover. (Leviticus 23:5)

On the fourteenth day of this month, in the evening, you shall keep it at its appointed time; according to all its statutes and all its ordinances you shall keep it. (Numbers 9:3)

And they kept the passover in the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, in the evening, in the wilderness of Sinai; according to all that the LORD commanded Moses, so the people of Israel did. (Numbers 9:5)

On the fourteenth day of the first month is the LORD's passover. (Numbers 28:16)

While the people of Israel were encamped in Gilgal they kept the passover on the fourteenth day of the month at evening in the plains of Jericho. (Joshua 5:10)

Josiah kept a passover to the LORD in Jerusalem; and they killed the passover lamb on the fourteenth day of the first month.

(II Chronicles 35:1)

On the fourteenth day of the first month the returned exiles kept the passover. (Ezra 6:19)

In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, you shall celebrate the feast of the passover, and for seven days unleavened bread shall be eaten. (Ezekiel 45:21)

Not one of the above verses suggests that *only* the killing of the Passover lambs was to take place on the fourteenth. Neither do any of these verses suggest that the cooking and eating of the lambs were to take place at the beginning of the fifteenth. This makes sense. Why would God inspire all these verses to state that the Passover was to be kept on the fourteenth if the actual "passing over" took place on the fifteenth (Exodus 12:12 & 23 & 27 & 29) which, of course, it did not?

What about Exodus 12:18?

In Exodus 12:18, doesn't Moses state that the Feast of Unleavened Bread runs from the evening of Abib 14?

In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread, and so until the twenty-first day of the month at evening. (Exodus 12:18)

If we compare the Hebrew text of this verse with that of verse 6, we find that the term "in the evening" (or "between the evenings") in verse 6 is translated from the two Hebrew words "beyn ha arbayim" whereas, in verse 18, "at evening" is translated from the Hebrew word "'ba erev" (translated in various scriptures as: *even, evening, night, eventide, eveningtide, days*, and other words). The word "beyn" (translated as: between, betwixt, asunder, within, between, out of, from) is not included in verse 18. Why the difference?

The seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread runs from the sunset that ends Abib 14 and begins Abib 15 to the sunset that ends Abib 21 and begins Abib 22:

And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the LORD; seven days you must eat unleavened bread. (Leviticus 23:6 NKJV)

And on the fifteenth day of this month is the feast; unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days. (Numbers 28:17 NKJV)

So we can be sure then that, in the case of Exodus 12:18, "in the evening" means the sunset that ends Abib 14. As we read earlier, the addition of the word "beyn" in verse 6 completely changes the meaning.

What about John 18:28 and 19:14?

Didn't John state that the Passover was just beginning at the time of Jesus' death and burial?

Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the praetorium. It was early (*on the morning of the 14th*). They themselves did not enter the praetorium, so that they might not be defiled, but might eat the passover. (John 18:28)

Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about the sixth hour (*Abib 14 at 6:00 a.m.*). He said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" (John 19:14)

These Jews who were keeping the Passover at the end of the fourteenth on into the fifteenth were keeping it at the wrong time! The proper time for the keeping of the Passover had been confused, perhaps during the Jews' seventy year exile in Babylon. The arguments as to whether the Passover should be kept at the beginning of Abib 14 or its end were extant even back in the first century AD, and different groups were keeping the Passover on the two different nights. One group killed, cooked and ate their lambs at the beginning of Abib 14. The others killed their lambs in the later hours of the 14th but cooked and ate them at the beginning of the 15th. Caiaphas and the Pharisees were among this latter group.

The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia states that:

The Pharisees and Sadducees had a dispute as to the time when the slaughtering should take place; the former held it should be in the last three hours before sunset (*i.e., at the end of the fourteenth*) , the latter, between sunset and nightfall (*probably at the beginning of the fourteenth*)."

In his best-selling book, "The Day Christ died," author Jim Bishop states:

Great numbers of the Jews would commence Passover observance at this time (*the beginning of Nisan 14*) though some believed the Passover would not start until the morrow.

Did Jesus and His disciples eat a Passover lamb dinner?

Some say that Jesus and His disciples did not eat a Passover lamb dinner on that night before His death. Again, what does God's Word say?

...the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the passover?" He said, "Go into the city to a certain one, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is at hand; I will keep the passover at your house with my disciples.'" And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the passover. (Matthew 26:17-19)

...His disciples said to him, "Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the passover?" And He sent two of His disciples, and said to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the householder, 'The Teacher says, 'Where is my guest room, where I am to eat the passover with my disciples?' And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there prepare for us." And the disciples set out and went to the city, and found it as He had told them; and they prepared the passover. (Mark 14:12-16)

So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the passover for us, that we may eat it." They said to Him, "Where will you have us prepare it?" He said to them, "Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house which he enters, and tell the householder, 'The Teacher says to you, Where is the guest room, where I am to eat the passover with my disciples?' And he will show you a large upper room furnished; there make ready." And they went, and found it as He had told them; and they prepared the passover. And when the hour came, he sat at table, and the apostles with him. And He said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer. (Luke 22:7-15)

There is no mention at all, neither from Jesus nor from His disciples, that there was to be any basic difference between this Passover dinner and the ones each of them had kept for the previous thirty years or so. There is no suggestion at all that Jesus' group did not eat a Passover lamb. Quite the contrary; please read the above verses again. Jesus introduced His changes (the symbolic foot-washing, bread and wine) during and after their dinner. At that point in time, He was still considered physically an *Old Testament* Israelite and, as such, was bound to eat the Passover lamb dinner.

Does it make any difference to Christians today?

Most members of the church of God agree that we are to keep the New Testament Passover at the beginning of Nisan 14. What difference does it make when it was kept in the Old Testament times? What difference does it make when the first Passover took place? What difference does it make whether or not Jesus changed the time of its keeping? Isn't the important thing that we keep it on the night that Jesus kept it on the night before His death?

Yes. However, immediately after Herbert Armstrong's death, such reasoning was put forward and became "the thin end of the wedge" for the many false doctrinal changes that were to follow. Less than three months after his death on January 16, 1986, the church's teachings on this point began to be subtly questioned. When some church members expressed concern about this, they were told to "put it on the back burner.... After all, what difference does it make? You don't have to change anything you do in your keeping of the Passover?" Then, as the questioning met little resistance, the teaching was changed. This was the first of many changes that led to the gradual erosion of the church's Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread doctrines... to the point where the church leaders were teaching that 'the Lord's Supper' may be kept four times (or more frequently) in the year, deleavening is unnecessary, the Night to be Much Observed no longer has to be observed, the keeping of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (and God's other Feasts) is no longer mandatory, and the keeping of Easter (named for a pagan goddess) and Good Friday are considered quite acceptable."

The rest, as they say, is history.

I do not want this to happen again. Do you?

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