Time is relative in determining chronology of Holy Week

by Michael Miller

There's a possibility that Good Friday should actually be Good Thursday - or maybe even Good Wednesday.

And there's a probability that Easter Sunday should be considered Easter Saturday Evening.

LAST SUPPER - Theologians continue to debate what really transpired during the Holy Week. CNS Illustration by Michael Anthony Noel.

Whether the events of Holy Week, the days leading up to Jesus's death and resurrection, occurred as they are now celebrated continues to be an occasional topic of discussion and study, scholars like Kevin Zuber of Moody Bible Institute say.

The traditional chronology has Jesus having his Last Supper with his disciples on Thursday night, being crucified on Friday afternoon and being resurrected sometime Saturday night or Sunday morning.

But the only clear time references of the events in the Gospels are that he was crucified on "preparation day" for a Sabbath and his tomb was found empty early "on the first day of the week." Jesus's own prophecy is that he would be in the "heart of the earth" for "three days and three nights" (Matthew 12:40).

Different calendars and understandings of time have to be taken into consideration, though.

Jewish days begin and end with sunset, meaning the "first day of the week" starts at sunset Saturday. Also, with the Feast of Unleavened Bread beginning that fateful week, there may have been Sabbaths on two separate days that week - first the annual Sabbath of the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread and then the regular, weekly Sabbath on the seventh day of the week - much like there was recently. That means there could have been two separate preparation days in the same week.

In addition, there is the question of whether the prophesied three days and three nights should be taken as a literal 72 hours or as a general accounting of three days, with the common understanding that one part of a day counts as a day.

"There's still quite an extensive debate about the chronology," said Zuber, an associate professor at Moody, though he added, "I don't think it was a terribly big issue for the Gospel writers."

"I have more questions than I have answers," said Tim Hegg, who writes extensively for the First Fruits of Zion ministry and is a teacher at messianic Congregation Beit Hallel in Tacoma, Wash.

One key in determining the chronology, according to Hegg, is Jesus' three days and nights prophecy. While it's generally agreed that the Resurrection occurred at some point between sunset Saturday and sunrise Sunday, how the prophecy is interpreted puts the event of the Crucifixion at different points on that week's calendar.

Ron Bolster, theology professor at Franciscan University of Steubenville in Ohio, said that if Jesus was put into the tomb before sunset Friday, then that day would count as one day, Saturday would count as a second day and any period after sunset Saturday would count as a third day.

He also said the Resurrection must have occurred before sunrise Sunday, because the Gospels record women arriving at the empty tomb while it was still dark or, at the latest, "at early dawn" (Luke 24:1). That, Bolster said, is why Catholics traditionally hold their biggest liturgical event of the year, the Easter Vigil Mass, shortly after sunset on the night before Easter Sunday.

Such an understanding of elapsed time also would include the "three nights" Jesus talked about as well without having to be taken literally, Bolster said.

Also, he added, the reference to "preparation day" in the Gospels indicate that it was a Friday, or sixth day of the week, the day that Jews would prepare for the weekly Sabbath.

However, as Bolster acknowledged, there are different opinions on whether it was a preparation day for the weekly Sabbath, as indicated by Matthew, Mark and Luke, or the Feast of Unleavened Bread, as indicated by John.

But that just brings up another question. If Passover hadn't yet started, then what were Jesus and his disciples doing eating a Passover meal the night before?

Hegg said a different calendar, possibly one used by a Jewish sect such as the one living at Qumran, may come into play, with Jesus and his disciples having their seder one night earlier than most other Jews of the time.

But Michael Cook, a professor of Judeo-Christian studies at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion said he believes the Last Supper wasn't a Passover seder at all. References to Passover were inserted into Mark's Gospel at a later date and then copied by Matthew and Luke, Cook said. He holds that John's account has the Last Supper, possibly a fellowship meal, occurring 24 hours before Passover - John 19:14 refers to the day as the preparation for the Passover - so that Jesus can be shown as being sacrificed at the same time the Passover lamb is being sacrificed.

However, he said, he believes all four Gospels have the crucifixion occurring on Friday due to the "preparation day" reference.

Ultimately, Hegg said he has settled on the Resurrection occurring at the end of the weekly Sabbath, when it was getting dark on Saturday night.

Hegg said that could count as one night, with the previous night - Friday night - being another night. But that would still call for another night, pushing the crucifixion back to either Wednesday or Thursday of that week - Wednesday for a 72-hour period, Thursday for parts of three days and three nights.

"I've generally held to a Wednesday crucifixion," Hegg said.

That would mean, according to Hegg's chronology, that Jesus and his disciples ate the Passover meal on what we would consider a Tuesday evening. The burial would have been shortly before sunset Wednesday, when the generally accepted first day of Unleavened Bread and Passover would be beginning. Jesus would be in the tomb Wednesday night, Thursday night and Friday night with the Resurrection at twilight Saturday.

Why would the chronology of Jesus's death have been changed at all, though? Hegg said he believes it was because by the year 100, Christian leaders wanted to create distance between the young church and the synagogue as well as between Christian festivals and Jewish holidays. Marking Jesus' death on what became Good Friday and the resurrection on what would become Easter Sunday was a way of breaking those celebrations loose from the Jewish Passover observance, much like the Christian Sabbath was moved from the seventh day of the week to the first day of the week.

Copley News Service Meaning before chronology

So, Jesus may have actually been crucified on Wednesday or Thursday of Holy Week.

The Last Supper might have been on Tuesday or Wednesday.

So what?

Kevin Zuber of Moody Bible Institute in Chicago doesn't think it really matters when all is said and done.

"The major two questions are, 'Was he actually dead and was he actually buried?', and the answer to both of those is yes, and however long it lasted theologically doesn't make any difference because he was raised from the dead and that's the whole meaning of the event," said Zuber, an associate professor who teaches a course on the life of Christ.

"When I teach this particular chronology to students, I say this has been a debate that's been around for centuries and while it's interesting, I want to make sure the person of Jesus Christ are what the Gospel writers are trying to get across."

Tim Hegg, an author and creator of www.torahresource.com, a messianic Web site, and Ron Bolster, director of catechetics at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio, also said the meaning should be considered first.

Passover, Hegg said, is a model of redemption in the Bible in its account of God's deliverance of the ancient Israelites from bondage in Egypt.

"It emphasized what Yeshua (Jesus) was doing was in fact completing, fulfilling, bringing to its zenith the redemptive work of God in the same way that Israel was redeemed from Egypt," he said.

"In that same way, mankind was to be redeemed by the messiah. His death coincides with the death of the (Passover) lamb. The lamb's blood is what gives protection to the Israelites and Yeshua's blood is what gives protection to those for whom he died. For me, that's the overarching point, and we dare not miss that in the midst of all of this."

Bolster said any evidence that the crucifixion occurred on a day other than a Friday wouldn't impact the Catholic Church just the way that it's generally accepted Jesus wasn't born on Dec. 25, Christmas Day.

"Liturgically, the most important thing is our ability to participate in the central redemptive event in all history," Bolster said.

Zuber said that "Ultimately what we're dealing with here are matters that have to do with not just history, but faith.

"The Gospel writers are theologians before they're chronologists. They're trying to answer the questions about the meanings of these events for those who want to understand Jesus and his death and resurrection."

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