

## Why Was Jesus Not Crucified As Passover Began? (Part Two)

by David C. Grabbe

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*“And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, . . . and yielded up His spirit.”*

—*Matthew 27:46, 50*

Jesus Christ kept His final Passover with His disciples the night before He suffered. He set the example for us of when and how to keep it “in remembrance of [Him],” and Paul underscores Christ’s instruction with the summary that “as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes” (I Corinthians 11:26).

However, Jesus, our Passover (I Corinthians 5:7), did not die until much later, near the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the first month. Since His death did not occur when we might expect—at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup>—what is the significance of the day and hour that God chose for the crucifixion to happen? When something as earth-shattering as the death of God in the flesh takes place at a unique time, we want to be sure we understand what He is telling us!

### “The Very Same Day”

The account of Israel’s exodus from Egypt provides a clue to the significance of the afternoon of the 14<sup>th</sup>:

Now the sojourn of the children of Israel who lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. And it came to pass at the end of the four hundred and thirty years—on that very same day—it came to pass that all the armies of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt. It is a night of solemn observance to the Lord for bringing them out of the land of Egypt. (Exodus 12:40-42)

The Israelites had killed the lambs after sunset as the 14<sup>th</sup> began, smearing the blood on the doorposts of their houses. They then roasted and ate the lambs, burning the remains. At midnight the Death Angel passed over, slaying the firstborn of those not under the blood. The Israelites remained in their houses until daybreak, after which they finished spoiling the Egyptians, then all 2-3 million of them traveled to Goshen. Numbers 33:3 records that they departed Rameses on the 15<sup>th</sup> day—“the day after the Passover”—and Deuteronomy 16:1 verifies that they left at night.

The Exodus, then, began at night, as Abib/Nisan 15 began. This “night of solemn observance” is the “very same day” or the “self-same day” (King James Version [KJV]) as an event that happened 430 years before—to the exact day. That prior event is the initial covenant God made with Abraham:

Then He said to him, “I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it.” And he said, “Lord God, how shall I know that I will inherit it?” So He said to him, “Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female

goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. . . .

Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him. Then He said to Abram: “Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. . . .

And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram. . . . (Genesis 15:7-10, 12-14, 17-18)

In verse 13, God’s states that Abraham’s descendants would be afflicted, yet finally delivered. This is that “very same day” to which Exodus 12:41-42 refers—the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> day, just after sunset. Genesis 14-15 contains time markers that help us line up these events with the Passover and Exodus from Egypt, as well as the Passover and crucifixion in the New Testament:

» “Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; [H]e was the priest of God Most High” (Genesis 14:18). This corresponds with Jesus’ Passover observance with bread and wine, which took place at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup>.

» “Then He brought him outside and said, ‘Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.’ And He said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be’” (Genesis 15:5). Abraham is outside and viewing the stars. The time has progressed to full dark on the 14<sup>th</sup>.

» The sacrificial activities described in Genesis 15:9-11 indicate the arrival of the daylight portion of Abib 14; it was light enough to make sacrifices. This method of making a covenant symbolizes that, if the terms were not met, the transgressor must be cut in half, just like the animals (see Jeremiah 34:18-20).

» “Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him” (Genesis 15:12). The sun begins to go down as soon as noon has passed, so this verse could indicate any time in the afternoon or early evening.

» “And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces” (Genesis 15:17). The sun has set and Abib 15 has begun. The symbol of a burning lamp is linked with the salvation of God’s people (Isaiah 62:1) and describes the eyes of God (Daniel 10:6). In addition, when God descended on Mount Sinai in fire, its “smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace” (Exodus 19:18). Through these symbols, God is seen confirming His covenant to Abraham by passing through the middle of the sacrificed animals.

What happened during the daylight portion of the 14<sup>th</sup> in Abraham’s day was a conversation about inheriting the land, then Abraham divided and arranged the animals at God’s command in preparation for the covenant. Thus, the timing of Christ’s crucifixion on the afternoon of Abib 14

points to something centuries before the Passover in Egypt—to the promises God made to the father of the faithful and to the preparations made for their covenant.

### **Spiritual Promises**

God makes this covenant in response to Abraham's question about inheriting the land. Yet, what is at stake is far greater than it first appears. Up to this point, God had already made promises about the land on three separate occasions, promises that included much more than just a geographic location with boundaries. When Abraham asks about the land, then, it is a simple way of referring to all that God had previously promised. If the Creator God was willing to swear to His own destruction with regard to the land, we can be sure He will fulfill everything else, too! To grasp the significance of this covenant, then, we must see what God had promised along with the land:

Now the Lord had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, *to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families [or nations] of the earth shall be blessed.*" (Genesis 12:1-3; our emphasis throughout)

God tells him to head toward a different land, which is linked with Abraham becoming a great nation. We usually interpret this as meaning a vast number of physical descendants, and God has certainly fulfilled that, considering the teeming populations of his offspring. However, the real meaning of being Abraham's children has to do with those who have the faith of Abraham (Galatians 3:7).

The Jews boasted that Abraham was their father, yet they were concerned only with physical lineage. Jesus told the priests and Pharisees that the kingdom would be taken from them and "given to *a nation* bearing the fruits of it" (Matthew 21:43). That nation is defined, not by a physical bloodline, but by a certain faith and a different spirit. Peter calls those with the faith of Abraham "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a *holy nation*, His own special people" (I Peter 2:9).

Genesis 12:3 says that in Abraham "all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Paul explains this promise in Galatians 3:8: "And the Scripture, foreseeing that *God would justify the Gentiles by faith*, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, '*In you all the nations shall be blessed.*'" From the Genesis 12:3 promise, Paul derives the idea that justification by faith would become available. In addition to foretelling a spiritual nation, God's promise of the land also suggests many being brought into alignment with God's standard of righteousness based on belief in Him.

Genesis 13:14-15 contains another promise involving the land:

And the Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him: "Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are—northward, southward, eastward, and westward; for all the land which you see I give *to you and your descendants forever.*"

This is a direct promise of not only Abraham's children's owning of the land, but also of Abraham's *personal* ownership of it. Yet the only land he ever owned was Sarah's burial plot—certainly not all the land he could see! For him to receive this promise, and for him to receive it "forever," means that he and his descendants will live forever.

Now eternal life has entered the picture. Eternal life includes a spirit body that will not decay and a nature that is appropriate or fitting for endless life, one that is sinless and not continually incurring the death penalty. Only in the resurrection of the dead at Christ's return will the called of God—including Abraham—be raised incorruptible and given immortality, such that death is swallowed up in victory (see I Corinthians 15:42-54). Then, Abraham and his spiritual descendants will inherit the Promised Land, retaining it forever.

### **The Faith of Abraham**

Romans 4:13 expounds on the promise of the land: "For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith." God's promise to Abraham was not based on perfect obedience to the law, but on the imputed righteousness that comes by faith, which happened when Abraham "believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). This took place well before the covenant of circumcision (Genesis 17:1-14). Abraham's faith *produced* good works, as true faith always will; in Genesis 26:5, God says, "Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws." But his righteousness in God's eyes was shown in his belief in God's faithfulness, not in anything he did or did not do.

Clearly, God's promise of the land to Abraham goes far beyond physical inheritance—it is, rather, an eternal inheritance, bestowed on those who have become his spiritual descendants through receiving the faith of Abraham. The patriarch, though, was among those who "died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them" (Hebrews 11:13). So significant are these promises that God confirmed them with a covenant that condemned Him to destruction if He failed to fulfill the terms. Not only that, the timing of Christ's sacrifice coincided with the preparations for God's covenant with Abraham, for it is His sacrifice that allows us—Abraham's spiritual seed, his "great nation"—to begin to receive these promises.

Hebrews 9:15-17 speaks of the "eternal inheritance" in the context of the comparing the Old and New Covenants:

And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant [with Israel], that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. For where there is a testament, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is in force after men are dead, since it has no power at all while the testator lives.

"The promise of the eternal inheritance" harkens back to the inheritance that God promised to Abraham, of which we become heirs through having the same faith as Abraham. It includes justification by faith, being part of a spiritual nation, and eternal life. As Paul writes in Galatians 3:29, "if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

Gilbert Wakefield offers an alternative translation of Hebrews 9:16-17 that brings out an important detail:

For where a covenant is, there must be necessarily introduced the death of that which establishe[s] the covenant; because a covenant is confirmed over dead things, and is of no force at all whil[e] that which establishe[s] the covenant is alive.

Similarly, *Young's Literal Translation* finds a commonality between the two covenants by using the term “covenant-victim” rather than “testator”:

. . . for where a covenant [is], the death of the covenant-victim to come in is necessary, for a covenant over dead victims [is] stedfast, since it is no force at all when the covenant-victim live[s].

In verses 16-17, most translations use “testament” and “testator,” which are indeed possible meanings of the Greek words. Like a “Last Will and Testament,” the New Covenant goes into effect only when the testator dies. This nuance, though, can apply only to the New Covenant, while the context of Hebrews 9 is *both* the Old and New Covenants. Both of them were sealed with “covenant-victims”—living beings that had their blood shed for the sake of establishing the respective covenants.

In the covenant with Israel, the covenant-victims were oxen and goats (see Exodus 24:5-8; Hebrews 9:19). The New Covenant, though, was confirmed with the bodily death of the Son of Man. Hebrews 10:5 says, “*a body* You have prepared for Me”—a body capable of having its blood drained out in sacrifice, both for the remission of sins and for the establishing of a covenant.

For Abraham, the covenant victims were mere animals. However, despite it not being explicitly stated, that covenant also required the life of the Creator. Paul explains in Galatians 3:8 that the promise that “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” indicates that God would justify the Gentiles by faith. Justification by faith is possible only through belief—trust—in a sacrifice of equal or greater value to the life forfeit due to sin. The blood of bulls and goats could never pay the life-debt of any human being; only the death of the sinless Creator could provide propitiation—justification—for all people. In this way, even though the Abrahamic covenant was confirmed only with slain animals, inherent within it was a promise of a future sacrifice so great that it would justify all those who believe in it.

### **Terrifying Darkness**

The gravity of the Abrahamic covenant is demonstrated by the “terrifying darkness [that] came down over him” (Genesis 15:12; *New Living Translation*). This is echoed in the three hours of darkness—from noon until 3 pm—on Abib 14 as Jesus was being crucified (Matthew 27:45), after which the firstborn Son of God died. Similarly, three days of extreme darkness (the ninth plague; Exodus 10:21-23) preceded the death of the Egyptian firstborn and Israel’s exodus from Egypt.

The prophet Amos helps tie these three events together:

“And it shall come to pass in that day,” says the Lord God, “That *I will make the sun go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in broad daylight; I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on every waist, and baldness on every head; I will make it like mourning for an only son, and its end like a bitter day.* (Amos 8:9-10)

This is a prophecy of judgment on the northern ten tribes of Israel, just as the darkness and death of the firstborn were a judgment on Egypt (Genesis 15:14). Jesus’ crucifixion was a judgment as well—on the nation that rejected its own Creator and King. After His death, “all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their

breasts” (Luke 23:48, *New English Translation*). Their feast had been turned into mourning, “like mourning for an only [S]on,” on the day that the sun went down at noon and the earth was darkened in broad daylight—on the afternoon of Abib 14.

It is not known what Abraham inferred from the terrifying darkness. Darkness sometimes describes the covering God uses when approaching mankind, so He does not annihilate weak flesh by the supreme brilliance of His presence (Exodus 20:21; Deuteronomy 4:11; 5:22-23; II Samuel 22:10, 12; Psalm 18:9, 11; 97:2). Undoubtedly, part of Abraham’s terror was the nearness of the awesome God, just as He was on the scene in His deliverance of Israel, as well as in the final hours before the death of His firstborn Son. Another cause of Abraham’s terror may have sprung from an arresting foreshadowing of his own promised son’s death, or perhaps he received a horrifying vision of the death of God’s Son as covenant-victim and propitiation to open the way for justification by faith.

A final piece of the picture: When Jesus was crucified, He fulfilled the requirement of the Passover lamb, as well as the prophecy that *not one bone would be broken* (John 19:36; Exodus 12:46; Psalm 34:20). Not one part of the structure of His body was separated from the rest, and so His crucifixion *cannot* be taken as an admission of guilt that He broke the covenant with Abraham. Unlike the animals, He was not cut asunder; His body served a positive purpose rather than one of defeat or failure.

Christ’s sacrifice confirming the New Covenant occurred on the anniversary of God’s covenantal promise to Abraham—the same day and hour! Its specific timing draws our attention to the “eternal inheritance” promised to Abraham and his spiritual seed. Jesus set the example of when and how He wants us to observe the Passover—at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup>—and then on that afternoon, He shed His blood so that a New Covenant could be made.

This covenant is an outgrowth of the covenant with Abraham, making his “great nation” a reality. It provides for justification on the basis of faith—for Israelite and Gentile alike—and promises eternal life to those who continue to the end in faith. Christ is our Passover, not by lining up with the timing outlined in the instructions given to Israel, but by renewing and advancing the covenant God made with Abraham.