

THE DATE OF THE PASSOVER SACRIFICES AND MARK 14:12

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It is usually thought that Jews sacrificed their Passover offerings in the Temple during the afternoon of 14th Nisan. There is, however, evidence that many people sacrificed on the 13th Nisan and the morning of the 14th Nisan. We begin with *Zebahim* 1:3:

הַפֶּסַח שֶׁנֶּחְטוּ בַשְּׁחֲרִית בְּאַרְבַּעָה עָשָׂר שְׁלֹא לְשֵׁמוֹ
יְהוֹשֻׁעַ מִכְשִׁיר כְּאִילוֹ נִשְׁחַט בְּשִׁלְשָׁה עָשָׂר בֶּן בְּתֵירָא פּוֹסֵל
כְּאִילוֹ נִשְׁחַט בֵּין הָעֶרְבִים

The Passover [victim] which they slaughter in the morning on the fourteenth [of Nisan] which [is] not [sacrificed] under its [proper] name, R. Joshua declares it valid as if it were slaughtered on the thirteenth. Ben Bathyra declares it invalid as if it were slaughtered ‘between the evenings’.

In this passage, the problem posed is that of the validity of a Passover victim slaughtered on the morning of 14th Nisan, rather than at the official time during the afternoon of 14th Nisan—an interpretation of the biblically appointed time ‘between the evenings’ (Ex. 12:6). The victim has been sacrificed under a different heading. Ben Bathyra’s judgement (‘invalid’) is what we might expect (*cf.* also *M. Pes.* 5:3). But R. Joshua’s judgement takes it for granted that Passover victims slaughtered on 13th Nisan were also valid. The *Sitz im Leben* of this judgement cannot be after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., but it makes excellent sense at the end of the Second Temple period, when Jerusalem was packed with pilgrims. It follows that everyone knew that many victims were sacrificed on the 13th Nisan, and that this was accepted practice. R. Joshua’s judgement likewise only makes sense if many victims were actually sacrificed on the morning of the 14th Nisan. He may be identified as Joshua ben

Hananiah, a relatively liberal rabbi who lived in Jerusalem before its fall, as did Ben Bathyra.

We can now interpret the opening of the Mishnaic tractate *Zebahim* in 1:1.

כל־הזבחים שֶׁנִּזְבְּחוּ שֶׁלֹּא לְשֵׁם חֹבֶה, חוּץ מִן־הַפֶּסַח, וּמִן־הַחֲטָאת, הַפֶּסַח
 לְבַעֲלֵים לְשֵׁם חֹבֶה, וְהַחֲטָאת בְּכָל זְמַן

All the Sacrifices which they sacrifice not under their [proper] name are valid (but they do not free their owners from their obligation), except for the Passover [victim] and the Sin-offering. The Passover [victim] in its time, and the Sin-offering at any time.

The opening principle explains how the priests and scribes decided that Passover victims slaughtered under another heading are valid: there was a general principle to that effect. Why is the Passover invalid, if sacrificed under another heading, only ‘in its time’? Surely no-one would be so foolish as to try to offer their Passover offering during the feast of Tabernacles? No indeed, the point must surely be to accept that Passover victims are valid if slaughtered under another name on 13th Nisan and the morning of 14th Nisan. This is why the Passover offering is different from the Sin-offering, which is always invalid if offered under the wrong heading.

With R. Joshua behind them, and an opposing rabbinical opinion recorded, some Jews will have had an unofficial exegesis of **בֵּין הָעֶרְבִים** (‘between the evenings’, Ex. 12:6). The dual/plural could readily have been interpreted as indicating 13th and 14th Nisan. They sacrificed their victims under a different heading to get round priests whose exegesis they regarded as inaccurate and very inconvenient. They naturally considered that they had fulfilled their obligation, thereby differing from the view of the compiler of Mishnah *Zebahim*.

These Mishnaic passages provide the background for understanding Mark 14:12: ‘And on the first day of unleavened bread,

when they were sacrificing the passover lamb....¹ Jesus sacrificed his lamb or goat at the official time.

¹In my view, the text of Mark is a translation of an Aramaic source, which at this point read: לפטיריא חד ביום 'on day one for unleavened breads.' Full critical discussion of the source of Mark's account of Jesus' final passover is offered in a manuscript *Aramaic Sources of Mark's Gospel*, publication of which is anticipated in the SNTS monograph series in 1998.