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## Can we resolve the gospel accounts of Holy Week?

April 12, 2019 by Ian Paul



Have you ever sat and read through the gospel accounts of Passion Week, and tried to work out chronologically what is happening? And have you done that with the four gospels? (It is easiest to do that latter using a synopsis, either in print or [using this one online](#).) Why not do it as part of your Holy Week devotions this year? If you do, you might notice several things.

1. Though there are variations in wording and in some details, there is a striking agreement between all four gospels in the order of the main events during the week.
2. The events at the beginning of the week around Palm Sunday, and at the end of the week around the crucifixion seem very busy, yet the middle seems very quiet—the issue of the ‘silent Wednesday’.
3. The main issue on which the gospel accounts disagree on the order of events is in relation to the denials of Peter by Jesus, which come earlier in Luke’s gospel, and are spread out in John’s gospel.
4. Jesus’ trial is more detailed, with more people involved in different phases in John than in the Matthew and Mark, the latter two treating it in quite a compressed as more or less a single event.

5. The synoptics claim explicitly that the last supper was some form of Passover meal (which must happen after the lambs are sacrificed), whilst John makes no mention of this, and appears to have Jesus crucified at the moment that the Passover lambs are sacrificed.

These anomalies have made the question of the Passion Week chronology ‘the most intractable problem in the New Testament’, and it causes many readers to wonder whether the accounts are reliable at all. For some, they are happy to inhabit the narratives in each gospel as they are, and not worry about reconciling each account with the others, or any of the accounts with what might have actually happened. But I am not sure it is quite so easy to have it there. After all, the word ‘gospel’ means ‘announcement of good news about something that has happened’; a central part of the Christian claim is that, in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has done something, and so we cannot evade question of what actually happened and when. Sceptics (both popular and academic) make much of these apparent inconsistencies, so there is an apologetic task to engage in. And understanding how these issues might be resolved could potentially shed new light on the meaning of the gospels themselves.

A few years ago, I caught up with Sir Colin Humphreys’ book *The Mystery of the Last Supper*, in which he attempts to solve this problem. Humphreys is an academic, and a distinguished one at that, though in materials science. He has written on biblical questions before, though is not a biblical studies professional, but he does engage thoroughly with some key parts of the literature. He identifies the main elements of the puzzle under four headings:

1. The lost day of Jesus, noticing the lull in activity in the middle of the week.
2. The problem of the last supper; what kind of meal was it, when did it happen, and can we harmonise John’s account with the synoptics?
3. No time for the trials of Jesus. If we include all the different elements, they cannot fit within the half night from Thursday to Friday morning.
4. The legality of the trials. Here, Humphreys notes that later Jewish sources prohibit the conduct of a capital trial during the night, and require that any decision is ratified on the morning following the first trial.

The book is set out very clearly and logically (as you might expect) and includes a good number of tables. Early on Humphreys helpfully tabulates the events in the gospels, showing their relationship.

Events between the last supper and the crucifixion in the order recorded in each gospel

Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Last supper	Last supper	Last supper	Last supper
Mount of Olives	Mount of Olives	Mount of Olives	Olive grove
Gethsemane	Gethsemane		
Jesus prayed	Jesus prayed	Jesus prayed	
Disciples fell asleep	Disciples fell asleep	Disciples fell asleep	
Jesus prayed	Jesus prayed		
Disciples fell asleep	Disciples fell asleep		
Jesus prayed	Jesus prayed		
Disciples fell asleep	Disciples fell asleep		
Jesus arrested	Jesus arrested	Jesus arrested	Jesus arrested
			Taken to Annas
			Peter's first denial
			Questioned by Annas
Taken to Caiaphas	Taken to High Priest	Taken to High Priest	Taken to Caiaphas
		Peter denies 3 times	Peter denies twice more
		Cock crows	Cock crows

Trial before Sanhedrin	Trial before Sanhedrin	Trial before Sanhedrin	
Peter denies 3 times	Peter denies 3 times		
Cock crows	Cock crows		
Jesus passed to the guards	Jesus passed to the guards		
Sanhedrin meet	Sanhedrin meet		
Trial before Pilate	Trial before Pilate	Trial before Pilate	Trial before Pilate
		Trial before Herod	
		Trial before Pilate	
Release of Barabbas	Release of Barabbas	Release of Barabbas	Release of Barabbas
Jesus flogged	Jesus flogged		Jesus flogged
Soldiers mock Jesus	Soldiers mock Jesus		Soldiers mock Jesus
			Condemned by Pilate
Simon carries cross	Simon carries cross	Simon carries cross	
Crucifixion	Crucifixion	Crucifixion	Crucifixion

Having started by looking at the biblical texts, in the middle of the book Humphreys goes on a long scientific exploration, delving into the astronomical issues behind the construction of Jewish calendars, and using this to argue for a particular date for the crucifixion. The key issue here is identifying the dates of the calendar from what we know of the moon phases, and then finding the years when the Passover falls on a Friday, which it will do on average only one year in seven.

Humphreys then uses other well-established data to eliminate outlying dates, and argues for Jesus' death at 3 pm on Friday, April 3rd, AD 33. He is not alone in this, though the style of his argumentation will have lost many mainstream New Testament specialists. He assumes that the gospels are historically accurate, and takes them as his basic data, when most scholars would want him to be much more provisional. If the case was expressed more in terms of 'were the gospels accurate, it would lead to this conclusion' might h

been more persuasive for the guild—but then Humphreys is primarily writing for a popular and not a professional audience.

I was much more interested, though, in the later chapters, where Humphreys explores the gospel texts in detail in the light of the calendrical background. Although his proposals about the different calendars in use at the time of Jesus are speculative (even if plausible), there can be no doubt that different calendars *were* in use, and that it is quite likely that different gospel writers are making reference to different calendar schedules which could rise to apparent anomalies in the gospel chronologies. In particular, some calendars reckoned sunset to sunset (as Jewish calculation works today), others counted from sunrise to sunrise, and the Roman calendar counted from midnight to midnight, as we do now. It is hard to see how the phrase ‘on the next day’ can now have three different possible meanings.

It is also clear that the gospel writers vary in the emphasis that they give to chronological details. So, whilst Luke offers some very specific markers in his narrative to locate the gospel story to wider world events (which has been [typical of his overall approach](#)), and Matthew includes [frequent temporal markers](#) in relation both to Jewish feasts and successive stages of Jesus’ ministry, Matthew is happy to group Jesus’ teaching and ministry into non-chronological blocks, and Mark has long been recognised as linking events in Jesus’ ministry thematically rather than chronologically. Humphreys uses an everyday example to illustrate this: if I cut the lawn and do some weeding, and someone asks my wife what I have been doing, and she says ‘He has been doing some weeding and cut the lawn’ then we would not describe our two accounts as ‘contradictory’. Chronology just hasn’t been an important issue here.

**Humphreys’ solution rests on proposing that**, in celebrating the Passover with his disciples, Jesus used pre-Exile calendar which ran sunrise to sunrise and was at least a day ahead of the official Jerusalem calendar, so that there could be up to two days’ difference in calculation. This means that, if the Jerusalem Passover took place on the Friday, following the sacrifice of the lambs on Friday afternoon, it would be possible for Jesus to celebrate his own Passover (and not merely a ‘Passover-like meal’ as some scholars have suggested) as early as the Wednesday. Humphreys believes that the man carrying the water jar (in [Luke 22.10](#) and parallels) is a signal that the Upper Room was in the Essene quarter of Jerusalem, where there would not have been any women to undertake such roles. And the calendar differences account for Mark’s statement that the lambs were sacrificed on the ‘first of the month’.

the feast of Unleavened Bread', ([Mark 14.12](#)) which is a contradiction that scholars have in the past attributed either to Mark's error or his careless writing.

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## From the last supper to the crucifixion

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Event	Gospels	Time
Last supper	All	Wednesday evening and night ending between midnight and 2 a.m. Thursday
Walk to Gethsemane	All	Early Thursday morning
Prayers in Gethsemane	Synoptics	Early Thursday morning
Jesus arrested	All	Early Thursday morning
Interrogation by Annas	John	About 3.00-4.30 a.m., Thursday
First denial by Peter and cock crow	All	About 3.00 a.m., Thursday
Third denial by Peter and cock crow	All	About 4.30 a.m., Thursday
Jesus taken to Caiaphas	All	About 5.00 a.m., Thursday
Main trial by Sanhedrin	Synoptics	Thursday after sunrise (at 5.46 a.m.), probably lasting for some hours
Sanhedrin hand over Jesus to the guards	Mark	Thursday at end of Sanhedrin trial
Second short Sanhedrin confirmatory trial	Matthew, Mark	Friday after sunrise (5.46 a.m.)
Trial before Pilate	All	Friday morning
Trial before Herod	Luke	Friday morning

Trial before Pilate	All	Friday morning
Pilate's wife reports dream	Matthew	Friday morning
Release of Barabbas	All	Friday morning
Jesus flogged	Matthew, Mark, John	Friday morning
Soldiers mock Jesus	Matthew, Mark, John	Friday morning
Simon carries cross	Synoptics	Friday morning
Crucifixion	All	Friday about 9.00 a.m.
Jesus dies	All	Friday about 3.00 p.m.

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At some points, I think Humphreys' case is actually slightly stronger than he claims. For example, John's phrase 'the Passover of the Jews' in [John 11.55](#) could arguably be translated as 'the Passover of the Judeans', thus emphasising communal and calendrical differences, and [Matthew highlights the differences](#) between the crowds of pilgrims and the local Jerusalemites in their response to Jesus. Richard Bauckham has argued that John is writing on the assumption that his readers know Mark, so there is no need for him to recount the details of the Passover meal in John 13 and following. And in the latest edition of Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, he argues (in an additional chapter) that the 'Beloved Disciple' is the author of the gospel but is not John son of Zebedee, and so not one of the Twelve, but a Jerusalemite. This explains some of the distinctive perspectives of John's gospel with its Judean and Jerusalem focus in contrast to Mark's focus on Galilee—but would also account for calendrical differences.

**There are some points of strain** in Humphreys' argument—for me, the most testing one was Humphreys' account of the cock crowing three times, the first of which was (he argues) the Roman horn blown to signal the approach of dawn, the *gallicinium* which is Latin for 'cock crow'. (I always struggle to be convinced by an argument that claims a repeated



phrase actually means different things at different times when the phrase is identical.) But there are also some interesting ways in which his reading makes better sense of some details of the text, such as the dream of Pilate's wife—which she could not have had time to have under the traditional chronology. Moreover, one of our earliest testimonies to the last supper, in [1 Cor 11.23](#), does not say (as much Anglican liturgy) 'on the night before he died' but 'on the night that he was betrayed'. I will be sticking with the latter phrase in my future use of Eucharistic Prayers! And when Paul says that Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us ([1 Cor 5.7](#)), and that he is the first fruits of those who sleep ([1 Cor 15.20](#)), Paul is locating his death on Passover (as per John, even though in other respects Paul's account echoes Luke, and it is largely Paul and Luke's language we use in liturgy) and his resurrection on the celebration of First Fruits two days later.

Humphreys is certainly bold in taking on key scholars, including Dick France (with whom I would always hesitate to disagree), but in every case he gives citations and explains where disagreement lies. When the book was first published, [Mark Goodacre wrote a brief blog](#) why he disagrees, and the debate in comments—including from Humphreys himself—worth reading. Goodacre's main concern is Humphreys' anxiety about demonstrating reliability of the gospel accounts, and the need to eliminate contradictions.

“ One of Humphreys's primary concerns is to avoid the idea that the Gospels “contradict themselves”. The concern is one that characterizes apologetic works and it is not a concern that I share.

But I wonder whether concern about this aim has led many scholars to dismiss the detail too quickly; much of academic scholarship is ideologically committed to the notion that the gospels are irredeemably contradictory. (If I were being mischievous, I would point to the irony of Mark's resisting Humphrey's challenging of a scholarly consensus, when that is precisely what Mark is doing himself in relation to the existence of 'Q', the supposed 'sayings source' that accounts for the shared material of Luke and Matthew...!) And we need to take seriously that fact that Humphrey's approach resolves several key issues (including the silence of Wednesday, the lack of time for the trial, the reference in [Mark 14.12](#), and Pilate's wife's dream) that are otherwise inexplicable or are put down (slightly arbitrarily) to writer error.

I think there are some further things to explore, but it seems to me that Humphreys' case is worth taking seriously. (Published in earlier forms in 2017 and 2018.)

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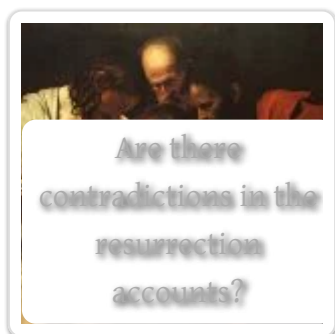
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## 🔗 thoughts on “Can we resolve the gospel accounts Holy Week?”



**Richard Gutteridge**

April 12, 2019 at 9:33 am

I think I read some time ago someone suggesting an occasional super Sabbath so that Jesus was crucified on Thursday rather than Friday as is usually understood. This dealt with “silent Wednesday” and also made more sense of the “third day”.

[Reply](#)



**Ian Paul**

April 12, 2019 at 10:47 am

That's interesting. Do you have a link? And I wonder what is the evidence for a 'super Sabbath'?

The 'third day' is not really an issue because of the 'inclusive' way of counting days.

[Reply](#)



**Richard Gutteridge**

April 12, 2019 at 11:04 am

<https://redeeminggod.com/case-for-thursday-crucifixion/>

I'm not sure if this was where I originally saw it but the argument is essentially the same

[Reply](#)



**Ian Paul**

April 12, 2019 at 1:43 pm

Thanks—I will have a read.

[Reply](#)



**Nick**

April 15, 2019 at 9:37 pm

I heard this from someone many years ago and it appears to make sense.

The person who told me noted that there could be a dispute about the day of new moon so that two different parties could easily be a day apart in their calendars. That could account for the Passover being at the right time for one party and a day later for another.

It doesn't give time for a longer trial, but then I wasn't aware that that was an issue. How long does a show trial take?

[Reply](#)

**David Hellsten**

April 12, 2019 at 11:52 am

Very interesting – but somehow I don't think we'll be moving our Maundy Thursday communion to Wednesday night any time soon...

I was going to ask if you (or Humphreys) had interacted with John Wenham's "Easter Enigma", but I just had a quick look and he doesn't really discuss the details of the crucifixion; his emphasis is on the chronology of the resurrection narratives. So instead I'm going to ask you if you agree with Bauckham's theory about the beloved disciple?

[Reply](#)



**Ian Paul**

April 12, 2019 at 1:47 pm

'I don't think we'll be moving our Maundy Thursday communion to Wednesday night any time soon'. Interestingly, one of Mark Goodacre's other objections to Humphreys is the early tradition of commemorating the last supper on Thursday in the Christian tradition, though I am not sure what to do with that as an argument.

Yes, Humphreys sticks with the pre-resurrection narratives.

I found Bauckham very persuasive, not least because, in his new additional chapter, he tackles objections head on from other notable scholars. I try now and refer to the fourth gospel as, well, the Fourth Gospel—though in commentating on texts, there is no easy way to avoid saying 'John says...' (unless you just go with 'the writer', or 'John'). Curiously, we do in fact know the name of the author of the Book of Revelation!

[Reply](#)

**PC1**

April 12, 2019 at 4:11 pm

I've read Bauckham's revised ed and too find it rather persuasive, at least his view that John's Gospel was written not by John the apostle but John the Elder. Though some scholars have argued they are the same person. I didn't find his argument about the apostle Matthew not being the Gospel author particularly strong.

Whilst Bauckham's thesis explains to some extent the differences in John and the synoptics, I've long been uncomfortable with the fact there is so much in John that is not in the synoptics. I can understand why John may have chosen not to have written about a certain event or teaching if he already knew of (at least) Mark and saw no point in duplication, but the main issue is the other way round – why are many of the teachings and events in John not in the synoptics. In many of those teachings, if not all of them, the main apostles/disciples would have been present, yet Mark (who records Peter's memories primarily if Bauckham is right) fails to mention them. I find that odd given their importance to Christian understanding of Jesus. Maybe Mark, and the others knew of them but chose to leave them out, but why?

[Reply](#)

**David James**

April 14, 2019 at 10:40 pm

....and thinking of those things left out by John but are in the synoptics, I have always been puzzled by the omission in John of the 3 hours of darkness, included specifically in the synoptics but not in John. Given John's light / darkness theme throughout the gospel I would have thought that the darkness at the cross would have been significant to John. After all he is the one gospel

to refer, for example, to the lanterns and lights carried by the arresting party. Of all the gospels I would have thought that his would be the one most likely to include it. Interestingly in his chapter on the 'moon turned to blood' Humphreys (looking at the technicalities of the blood red moon [Acts 2:20](#)) includes a small section on the 3 hours of darkness. His suggestion that the darkness was due to a dust-storm (khamsin) I found fascinating but not convincing ( mainly because as an explanation it does not seem to be the supernatural event implied in the texts). So why did John not mention the darkness? If the author of John is the beloved disciple, I have seen it suggested that it happened when he was away from the cross taking Mary to his home (19:27) and thus could give no 'eyewitness testimony' but I find that unconvincing. I cannot recall whether Bauckham mentions this aspect. Sorry, moved a fair bit away from the main point of the post! ...but I found your post a very helpful summary of the book and issues.

[Reply](#)

**PC1**

April 15, 2019 at 11:23 am

I can see why John may have left out certain details if he already knew Mark etc had written of them. He may have wanted to emphasize other aspects of the story which is perfectly understandable .

As for the darkness, I think there is a tendency to 'explain away' nearly every aspect in natural terms. But I find that odd given that within 3 days we have THE most supernatural event ever! Of course some have argued it was 'symbolic' but I find that hard to accept.

I havent read Humphrey's book but I certainly think he has a point about different calendars being used – the easy option is to assume they all used the same calendar, and therefore no more thinking is required – conclusion: the Gospels are inaccurate and therefore unreliable, the typical atheist response. But I find some of his assertions unconvincing, eg that the 3 cock crows were not all actual cock crows!

## Christopher Shell

April 15, 2019 at 2:08 pm

The quick one-stop answer to this would be that the author of John's Gospel is the same person from whom we have the information (via Papias) that Mark's content (or a good proportion of it) corresponds to Peter's preaching, of which Mark was keen not to leave anything out.

It is also often clear (on John the Baptist, Lazarus family, interaction with Gethsemane, 5000 story and anointing story retail prices etc.) that this author knows Mark well. And presupposes Mark.

Bauckham has also written on this in *The Gospels for All Christians*, and subsequently as you saw.

Why are many of the teachings and events in John not in the synoptics? I think the later gospel-writers' priority (and all of them regard Mark as foundational) was more to present OT-fulfilment-programmes.

[Reply](#)

## Steven Robinson

April 12, 2019 at 6:45 pm

Peter ([I Pet 5:1](#)) refers to himself as an elder. Papias refers to the apostles as elders. Revelation appears to refer to the 12 apostles as elders (along with the 12 sons of Jacob). Accordingly, when John the writer of the epistle refers to himself as 'the' elder, i.e. the John who is an elder, it seems to me that he is making a point of saying he is the John who is an apostle.

[Reply](#)



## **Christopher Shell**

April 15, 2019 at 2:35 pm

Apostles are all elders. Not all elders are apostles. Acts 15 makes that clear. 'Elders' is a very broad term indeed – referring to physically old people, council members (who will generally be actually old), disciples who are not actually apostles, etc..

If 'The Elder' is a standard designation for this individual, as it must be given 2-3 John, then that massively helps us in our interpretation of Papias. We would not have been sure from Papias alone that 'the Elder John' was the way people actually referred to this individual (the way he referred to himself, too! forsooth) rather than being some reference by Papias to his own Papian internal logic.

[Reply](#)

## **John**

April 12, 2019 at 4:02 pm

Humphrey's harmonisation results in the same reductio ad absurdum as Jaubert's similar (pontifically endorsed!) hypothesis, namely that John and the Synoptics are both wrong where they agree (Jesus' supped on Thurs/died on Friday), in preference for a chronology which none of the gospels state. It may solve some timing difficulties (assuming that the gospels must be harmonised, whatever the cost!). In this instance, however, it is plainly Humphreys, not Goodacre, whose ideological commitments have led him to an ingenious yet false hypothesis.

[Reply](#)



**Ian Paul**

April 12, 2019 at 6:35 pm

Hang on...where do either the Synoptics or say that Jesus supped on Thursday evening?

[Reply](#)

**Steven Robinson**

April 12, 2019 at 10:53 pm

A good place to start is [Matt 12:40](#): the Son of Man would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. [Mark 9:31](#), likewise, says he will rise 'after three days'. In other places Jesus speaks of rising 'on the third day', but Hebrew writers – Matthew and John Mark (also a Jew) – counted non-inclusively. Luke, as a Greek, counted inclusively but in reporting the words of Jesus, who counted non-inclusively, may have stuck to his exact words. Having Christ die on Friday and rise before dawn on Sunday does not satisfy these primary data.

In AD 30, as I understand it, Nisan 14, when Jesus was crucified, fell on a Thursday. The following day was a special sabbath ([Ex 12:16](#)), the next day an ordinary sabbath.

One scenario would be for Jesus to have celebrated Passover with his disciples 'between the two evenings' ([Ex 12:6](#)) between Nisan 13 and Nisan 14, whereas most of the population celebrated it on the basis that 'between the two evenings' referred to the end of Nisan 14. But then I am puzzled by the indication in [Matt 26:17](#) that the day Jesus celebrated the meal was the 'first day of unleavened bread'. One could speculate that it became customary to eschew leavened bread from the day the passover meal was prepared, a day or two in advance of the obligatory 7-day Feast of Unleavened Bread itself. Alternatively, Jesus may have used a differe

calendar whereby Nisan 14 fell on the Wednesday instead of Thursday. What does not seem tenable is any argument that he was crucified on the Friday.

[Reply](#)

**Neill Burgess**

April 13, 2019 at 2:20 pm

Thanks for posting Ian. We may never find a reconciliation that everyone agrees on, but we should not shy away from trying, and i for one have been helped by this article.

[Reply](#)

**John**

April 13, 2019 at 10:17 pm

Thanks Ian for an absorbing and edifying read. I believe the four Gospels can be reconciled as a coherent and unified testimony to the events of that first, momentous Holy Week, and obscure details such as the way Jews and Romans counted time are significant.

At the end of the day though, however insatiable our curiosity, whether the last supper was on Wednesday or Thursday and whether the Lord died on Thursday or Friday are of course academic compared with his giving us the precious gift of Holy Communion and dying for us all.

BTW, the John of April 12, 4:02pm is not me, but another.

[Reply](#)

**Peter Sammons**

April 18, 2019 at 4:26 pm

David Serle and I have recently brought out a new book “Three Days and Three Nights – That Changed The World” (published by Christian Publications International).

We look at Colin J Humphreys – we agree with some of his key conclusions, but not others.

Essentially Serle and I conclude that the biblical accounts are dependable , but we do need a few ‘keys’ to unlock the apparent inconsistencies. Serle and I conclude this is a Thursday crucifixion with two calendars in simultaneous use (the Humphreys conclusion, too).

There is a useful free timeline and spoiler article (!!!) on the CPI website, so folk can get a good insight as to our argument.

Praise God!

[Reply](#)



**Ian Paul**

April 20, 2019 at 9:02 am

Thanks–do you have the link to this?

I am not sure Humphreys argues that the gospel accounts are not ‘dependable’—but none of them actually say which night Jesus held the Last Supper. He is working with the information set out in the accounts, and noting the implications, especially the timing of the trials, when read in cultural context.

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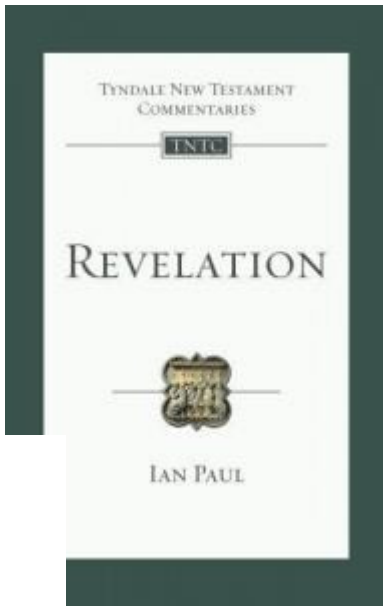
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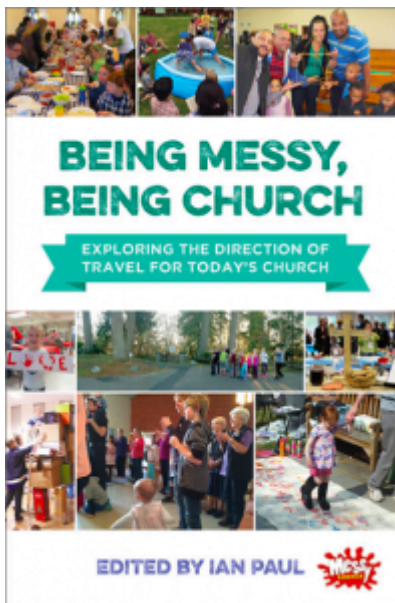






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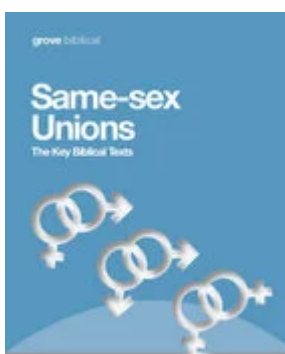
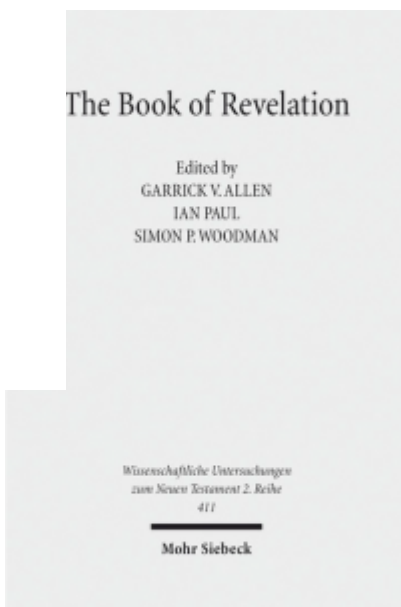
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