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By Randy Chesnutt

# PASSOVER, LAST SUPPER, AND LORD'S SUPPER

## *Jewish Elements for Christian Reclamation*

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke indicate that Jesus' Last Supper was a Passover meal (Matt. 26:17-29; Mk. 14:12-25; Lk. 22:7-23). The Gospel of John presents a somewhat different chronology; there the Last Supper precedes Passover, and in fact the Passover meal is yet in the future at the time of Jesus' death (13:1-2, 29; 18:28; 19:14, 31, 42). The explanation for this divergence probably lies in the various Jewish calendars in use in the early first century A.D. In his account of the passion, John apparently followed a different calendar from that reflected in the other Gospels, perhaps because this enabled him to emphasize Jesus' death coincide with the slaying of the Passover lambs in the Temple. Whether or not this is the correct explanation for a much-discussed chronological problem, one thing seems abundantly clear: Jesus' Last Supper was a Passover meal. The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are quite explicit on this point, and, as we shall see, there are elements in the Synoptic

accounts confirming this identification.

The purpose of this article is to explore the significance of the Passover setting of the Last Supper. What was an ancient Passover meal like? Does the Passover character of the occasion shed light on the New Testament accounts of the Last Supper? In what ways should the Passover roots of the Lord's Supper inform our understanding and celebration of the sacred Christian meal? Answers to these questions must be grounded in an appreciation of Passover as it was practiced in Jesus' time.

### **Passover in the First Century A.D.**

Students of the Old Testament know that Passover commemorates the great deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage. Also familiar from the Old Testament are some of the food items comprising the Passover meal: lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs (see Exod. 12-13). The lamb, of course, reminded participants of the lambs whose blood was smeared on the doorposts in Egypt so the death angel would pass over and spare Israelite children from the tenth and final plague prior to the Exodus. Unleavened bread was used in the celebration as a reminder of the hasty departure of the forebears from Egypt in an hour of such crisis that there was no time to wait for bread to rise. The bitter herbs (such as horse radish, chicory, and endive) were interpreted as reminders of the

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bitterness of Egyptian bondage.

Less familiar to non-Jews are the many Passover traditions which are not described in the Old Testament but which evolved in subsequent centuries. Many of these are described in the Mishnah, the written codification of Jewish oral law compiled around 200 A.D. Although this source contains many traditions later than the first century A.D., the Passover celebration described in it is thought to be essentially that practiced in Jesus' time. In addition to the symbolic food items specified in the Bible, others equally laden with symbolic significance are described in the Mishnah. Thus, for example, a fruit purée called **haroseth**, consisting of a mixture of finely-ground fruits, spices, and vinegar, served as a dip for the bitter herbs. Because of its color and consistency, it provided a reminder of the clay used when the ancestors made bricks during their servitude in Egypt. The Mishnah also calls for the drinking of four cups of wine to celebrate God's deliverance of his people (the rabbis discerned four aspects of God's promise of deliverance in Exod. 6:6-7). Somewhat later rabbinic texts mention still other symbolic items; among those with possible roots in first century practice are a bowl of salt water symbolizing the tears shed in Egypt (or, according to some, the waters of the Red Sea) and used as a dip for certain foods, and cinnamon sticks placed in the fruit purée to represent the straw used in brickmaking.

On the thirteenth day of the Jewish month of Nisan, all traces of leaven were removed from every house in which Passover was to be observed. On the afternoon of the fourteenth day the lambs destined to be the main course of the meal were slaughtered in the Temple. On the evening of that day (which was the fifteenth day by Jewish reckoning since a new day was considered to begin at sunset) the Passover meal was eaten. The particulars of that meal and the accompanying celebration varied somewhat from time to time and place to place, but the Passover **Seder** (order, arrangement) described in the Mishnah provides our earliest detailed account and may be outlined in four parts as follows:

- I. **Preliminary Course.** The head of the household said a blessing for the feast day generally and for the first cup of wine. The first cup of wine was drunk and the pre-

liminary dishes, including the bitter herbs and fruit purée, were eaten. The main course (see III below) was served and the second cup of wine was poured.

- II. **Passover Liturgy.** The youngest son competent to do so inquired formally about the meaning of the occasion: "Why is this night different from all other nights . . . ?" The head of the household responded with the Passover **Haggadah**— a retelling of the Exodus story beginning with "A wandering Aramaean was my father. . ." (Deut. 26:5) and continuing through God's mighty acts of redemption as these were suggested by the symbolic foods. This was followed by the singing of Psalms 113-114 (or perhaps only 113), the first part of the great **Hallel** (Psalms 113-118). Then followed the drinking of the second cup of wine.
- III. **Main Course.** The head of the household blessed, broke, and distributed the unleavened bread. The main meal, consisting of the roasted lamb, unleavened bread, bitter herbs, and fruit purée, was

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eaten. The third cup of wine was blessed and served.

- IV. **Close.** Psalms 115-118 (or perhaps 114-118), the remainder of the **Hallel**, was sung. The fourth cup of wine was blessed and

served.

Description of the mere mechanics of a Passover celebration does not do justice to the profound religious significance of the occasion for ancient Jews. One must also appreciate the atmosphere created, the memories evoked, the

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praise inspired, the hopes rekindled, the festiveness aroused, the self-identity revitalized, and the communal solidarity nurtured by this sacred occasion. Two such aspects of Passover which underlie all of the external acts are especially noteworthy.

One is the sacred memory of God's mighty acts of deliverance of his people. As we have seen, the very food on the table provided vivid reminders of the Egyptian bondage and the Exodus. The Passover liturgy likewise highlighted God's saving acts by providing for the retelling of the Exodus story at the high point of the celebration. As the foundational event of Israel's national existence, the Exodus story was told and retold to Israel's youth because it was considered definitive for their self-identity as the people of God. The great **Hallel** which was sung after the **Haggadah**, or recounting of the story, consisted of psalms of praise and thanksgiving to God for his gracious and powerful acts.

Second, the Passover liturgy called not only for a **retelling** but a **reliving** of the deliverance wrought by God. A portion of the Passover legislation in the Mishnah reads:

In every generation a man must so regard himself as if **he** came forth **himself** out of Egypt, for it is written, "And thou shalt tell thy son in that day, saying, It is because of that which the Lord did for **me** when I came forth out of Egypt" (Exod. 13.8). Therefore are we bound to give thanks, to praise, to glorify, to honour, to exalt, to extol, and to bless him

who wrought all these wonders for our fathers and for **us**. He brought **us** out from bondage to freedom, from sorrow to gladness, and from mourning to a Festival-day, and from darkness to great light, and from servitude to redemption; so let us say before him the **Hallelujah**.

The pronouns have been highlighted here in order to show how present participation in the past event was emphasized at Passover. In the same spirit, one rabbinic text defines the "wicked son" as one who inquired, "What do you mean by this service?" This text complains that by using the **second person** pronoun, the inquirer excludes himself and rejects one of the fundamental principles of Judaism. Thinking of oneself as an actual slave liberated from Egypt served both to encourage individuals to appropriate for themselves the benefits of God's gracious acts and to strengthen the individual's sense of oneness with the community of Israel. To fail to read the national experience of deliverance into one's own experience was to renounce God's saving grace and to exclude oneself from the community of the elect. Full participation in Passover meant that the external facts of history became living, present realities marking both the personal experience of deliverance and the oneness of the community of people thus liberated by God.

### The Last Supper as a Passover Meal

Much in the Synoptic accounts of the Last Supper becomes understandable against the backdrop of the Jewish Passover celebration. Thus, for example, we know what preparations are envisioned in the Synoptic passages in which Jesus sends the disciples ahead to prepare the Passover (Matt. 26:17-18; Mk. 14:12-16; Lk. 22:7-13). The painstaking removal of all leaven (including even grain by-products with any potential for fermentation), the ritual slaughter of the lamb in the Temple, and the careful preparation of the various items of food would indeed have been a sizeable task. It is understandable that the day before the meal came to be called "the day of Preparation" (see Jn. 19:14). From Passover custom we also know the source and significance of the bread and wine which are invested with new symbolic meaning. We can deduce that the sauce mentioned in Matt. 26:23 and Mk. 14:20 (see also Jn. 13:26) is the Passover **haroseth**, or fruit purée. Also in

keeping with Passover custom, the hymn sung by the group at the conclusion of the celebration would be the familiar one consisting of Psalms 115-118 (or perhaps 114-118), the final part of the **Hallel**.

Jesus' own actions at the meal correspond in large measure to the duties of the head of the family as Passover host. As we have seen, at the appropriate time the head of the household would take bread, bless it, break off a piece for each guest, and distribute it. At the end of the meal he would take a cup of wine, bless it, and serve it to the guests. Thus far the actions of Jesus — so familiar from the Gospels as the acts by which he instituted the Lord's Supper — are very much a normal part of the host's responsibilities at Passover. Of course, the symbolic significance ascribed to the bread and wine are uniquely Christian, but the very act of explaining the symbolic significance of various parts of the meal has a formal precedent in the Passover host's recounting of the story behind the symbols.

One aspect of Luke's account of the Last Supper (22:14-23) which has been especially puzzling to many becomes quite understandable in light of the Passover customs described above. According to Luke, Jesus first takes a cup, then the bread, then another cup. Although some ancient manuscripts omit the reference to the second cup in verses 19b-20, most textual scholars now agree that these verses are a part of the original. Early Christian copyists may have omitted these lines for precisely the same reason that modern interpreters have found them problematic — namely, the reference therein to a second cup not mentioned in the other Gospels or in Paul's account of the Last Supper in I Cor. 11:23-25. However, once the Passover context of the Last Supper is understood, this problem disappears. The first cup mentioned in Luke would simply be the second of the four cups of wine typically drunk at Passover. The second cup mentioned in Luke, the one to which Jesus attached new symbolism, would be the third of the four Passover cups, the one following the main Passover meal. This identification of the second cup in Luke is confirmed by his reference to it as "the cup after supper" (22:20; see part III in the **Seder** outlined above). Paul also places the cup of the Lord's Supper "after supper" (I Cor. 11:25) and calls it "the cup of blessing" (I Cor. 10:16) — a rabbinic designation of the third Passover cup, though this usage cannot be documented in the first century.

Passover provides not only the external framework for the narratives of the Last Supper but much of the conceptual framework as well. The consciousness of a gracious God who acts in history to effect redemption was not an idea introduced into the sacred meal by Jesus or the early Church, but one long celebrated in the Jewish Passover. The major themes which find expression in the Last Supper narratives — including God's covenants sealed with blood, thanksgiving for past deliverance, anticipation of future consummation, and the corporate identity and solidarity of God's people — are all part and parcel of the Passover meal in which Jesus' Last Supper is set.

### Jewish Elements for Christian Reclamation

That an appreciation of Jewish Passover will enrich the Christian celebration of the Lord's Supper is inevitable in view of two basic facts: (1) Jesus' Last Supper was a Passover meal; and (2) Jesus' Last Supper provides the model for the Church's observance of the Lord's Supper. Having considered the deep roots of the Lord's Supper in the soil of Jewish Passover, we turn now to some practical considerations. Of course, in some ways the Christian sacred meal must be contextualized in whatever culture it is practiced, but certain aspects of the Jewish heritage are so integral to the very essence of the Last Supper that they are crucial whenever and wherever the Lord's Supper is observed. Several

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components of Passover to which we have already alluded suggest themselves as worthy of reclamation by the Church in its observance of the Lord's Supper.

One such component is the Jewish emphasis on recounting the sacred story commemorated in the meal. Jewish children were

told about the Exodus because it was determinative for their self-identity; it was what had called Israel into existence as the people of God. By hearing over and over the story of God's greatest and most formative act of deliverance on behalf of Israel, Jews of all ages were reminded of who they were as the covenant people of God. One ancient form of the Passover **Haggadah** insists that the story of the Exodus is to be recounted even if everyone present is an adult learned in Scripture.

What the Exodus story is to Jews, the Passion story is to Christians. Jesus' Passion is definitive for Christian identity; it is what effects a new liberation, calls into existence a new people of God, and inaugurates a new covenant ratified by blood (note the covenantal language in all four accounts: Matt. 26:28; Mk. 14:24; Lk. 22:20; and I Cor. 11:25; echoing the language of Exod. 24:8 and Jer. 31:31-34). As God's most decisive act of deliverance, it merits telling and retelling in Christian families and in the Church so that it is deeply ingrained in the consciousness of children from their earliest memory. The power of sacred story to shape the self-concept and determine the religious and social identity even of a child should be recognized and exploited in modern Christianity no less than it was in the ancient Jewish liturgy. In the language of theologians, the **indicative** must precede the **imperative**; that is, the call to believe in and worship a God who has acted mightily in history must be rooted and grounded in the story of those mighty acts. With particular reference to the Lord's Supper, meaningful participation is impossible without a vivid remembrance of the Passion. Paul acknowledged that those who eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord's table "**proclaim the Lord's death**" (I Cor. 11:26).

The ancient Passover liturgy called not merely for a **retelling** but a **personal appropriation** of redemptive history. The very act of slaying the lamb required personal involvement; the Passover sacrifice was the only form of sacrifice in which the animal was ritually slaughtered by the individual worshiper rather than by the priests. God's gracious acts in ancient history are of no value to the individual who does not appropriate them as living, present realities. Paul therefore represents Christian baptism as a reenactment of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus (Rom. 6:1-11). The Lord's Supper likewise affords each participant an occasion for going back to the scenes of the

Cross and basking in the redemption accomplished there. As in Passover, so in the Lord's Supper, full participation entails reflection in the **first person**. The true worshiper asks not merely, "What does this celebration mean?" or "What does it mean to **you**?" or "What does it mean to **them**?" but especially "What does it mean to **me**?" Passover and Lord's Supper alike celebrate not the abstract fact of redemption, but the fact that God has redeemed **me**.

The Jewish celebration of God's past intervention in history inevitably heightened anticipation that he would intervene yet again. Ancient Passover prayers, possibly with roots in first century Jewish liturgy, appeal for God to bring the Messiah to his people. There are numerous other indications that the expectation of God's intervention to consummate the redemption of his people was most intense at Passover. Jews engaged in the feast as a people redeemed and yet awaiting redemption. The Christian Supper has something of this same character as an interim celebration between God's past and future interventions in history. It is a "meal between the ages," commemorating God's decisive acts of redemption in the past but also looking forward to the consummation of redemption and to the great heavenly banquet. In Paul's terms, the Lord's Supper is a memorial of the Lord's death "**until he comes**" (I Cor. 11:26).

Passover involved not only a looking **up** to God with praise and thanksgiving, a looking **back** to God's mighty acts in redemptive history, and a looking **forward** to God's future acts, but also a looking **around** to the community of which the individual was a part. The ancient Jewish sense of the corporate solidarity of the people of God was at no time stronger than at Passover. By focusing on a part of Israel's heritage which all Jews shared, this feast became a rallying point for ethnic and religious unity. Social barriers and personal differences were overshadowed by what was held in common. The very fact that the Passover lamb had to be slain at the central sanctuary in Jerusalem served as a reminder that the individual and the family were part of a larger unit, the people of Israel.

That such a sense of the oneness of God's people should also characterize the Lord's Supper surely is a legitimate deduction from the Passover context of the Last Supper. In fact, no sooner had the Lord's Supper become dislodged from its Jewish moorings and contextualized in an individualistic Greek setting than serious

problems arose in maintaining unity. In I Cor. 11:18-22 Paul laments the factionalism and disregard for fellow worshipers that had come to characterize the Corinthian assemblies. Indeed, it was precisely in response to this disunity that he narrates the Last Supper and the institution of the Lord's Supper (11:23-32), and it is on the basis of this narrative that he then appeals for the Corinthians to be sensitive to one another (11:33-34). Divisions among the Corinthian Christians indicated to Paul that the "body" character of the Church had not been fully appreciated. Particularly at the Lord's table, such selfish individualism was unthinkable: "Because there is **one** bread, we who are many are **one** body, for we all partake of the **one** bread" (10:17). The discernment of "the body" which he urges in 11:29 is probably an appeal to acknowledge the corporate character of the Christian community. The Lord's Supper, like Passover, celebrates the one thing that all participants have in common, the foundational event of the faith. It should therefore foster a sense of communal identity and solidarity. To participate as an individual without a sense of oneness and fellowship with the larger Christian community is to make a mockery of the essential communal character of the Supper.

One further feature of the ancient Passover celebration which should be noted because it provided so much of the ambiance of the Last Supper is bound up in the word "celebration" itself. Passover was not a somber occasion but a very festive one. While frivolity and levity were considered inappropriate — the Mishnah warns against after-dinner revelry in particular — the predominant mood was one of joyous celebration. Such joy was considered a natural corollary of the sense of deliverance from bondage that each participant was encouraged to experience afresh. In the case of the Lord's Supper, solemn remembrance and sober reflec-

tion are, of course, crucial — as at Passover — but such a reflective atmosphere need not be melancholic. It may be suggested, in fact, that a genuine sense of redemption from sin through Christ cannot help but issue in joyful celebration not unlike that which typified Passover.

The Lord's Supper is not simply a Christian Passover, but it does (according to the Synoptic Gospels) originate in the context of that Jewish meal and it does build on many of the ideas, the atmosphere, and the practices of an ancient Passover celebration. In celebrating the Lord's Supper today, the Church would do well to ask whether it does justice not merely to the outward aspects of the rite but also to the atmosphere of memory and hope, the spirit of thanksgiving and praise, the sense of personal redemption and corporate solidarity, and the mood of joy and celebration. In these areas the Jewish heritage of the Supper has a great deal to teach us.

### Suggestions for Further Reading:

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Joachim Jeremias, The Eucharistic Words of Jesus, 3rd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966).

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