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Foreword

Every era brings its own challenges and opportunities to the church and to the life of faith. In this regard, our time is no different from any other. And yet the particular issues of the present age are ours to face and to do so responsibly. For us to acquit ourselves well entails informed and prayerful reflection. The collection of essays in this issue of *Christian Studies* are presented with the intention of stimulating Christian thought and conversation.

Words of thanks are due to Everett Ferguson and Paul Watson, long-time friends of the graduate school, for their contributions to this issue of *Christian Studies*.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

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“This is the Covenant in My Blood”

The Lord’s Supper, Passover, and Christian Community

R. Mark Shipp

Increasing attention has been given by Christians in recent years to the roots of the Lord’s Supper in the Old Testament Passover. Recently, the *Austin American Statesman* devoted the front pages of its *Metro* and *State* sections to this phenomenon:

In the past decade, many Christians nationwide have begun observing the Jewish Passover, which falls during the Easter season. In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus’ last meal is recorded as a Passover observance.

Mainline Christians who observe Passover say it gives them a chance to connect with their religious heritage.¹

The same issue includes two articles in the “Life and Food” section entitled “Set the Table with a New Seder Plate” and “Think All Kosher Wines are Sweet? Think Again,” both dedicated to the Passover celebration. Interest among Christians is at an all time high relative to Passover.

But what exactly is the connection between Christians and Passover? Why all of this interest in an ancient ceremony which adherents of another religion continue to practice? I think it is partially because the early Christians

¹*Austin American-Statesman*, Wednesday, April 19, 2000, section B 1.

were Jews and celebrated Jewish festivals, but it is mostly because the single ritual which binds all Christians together on a regular basis began as part of a Passover meal. Jesus took some of the elements of the Passover and redefined them forever as referring to him, to his sacrifice, and therefore central to the faith of all believers. But this new covenant in the body and blood of Jesus can be better appreciated with some attention to its background in the Exodus from Egypt and the Passover traditions. I will direct attention in the following first to a description of the elements of the Passover and their meaning and then to some signposts pointing to the significance of the of the Passover and the Lord's Supper.

The Elements of the Passover

The first Passover celebration is described in the book of Exodus, chapters 11–12. The occasion for the Passover was the tenth plague: because Pharaoh had hardened his heart, God was going to bring the final and most devastating plague upon Egypt. All of the firstborn of human and beast would be killed, except for those who smeared the blood of a lamb on their door posts. In chapter 12, the Israelites are commanded to kill one unblemished lamb per household, smear its blood around the door, and roast the lamb without breaking its legs. They were to eat it in a hurry, with their feet shod and their staff in their hand, prepared to leave on their journey. The prescribed meal on the first Passover night and all subsequent ones also included unleavened bread (the symbol of the haste with which Israel went out from Egypt, because there was no time for bread to rise; leaven, *hametz*, was later understood to be symbolic of sin) and bitter herbs, the reason for the eating of which is not given, but ancient tradition attributes to the bitterness of Egyptian bondage. The feast of Passover has always been associated also with the seven day Feast of Unleavened Bread, the seven days following the Passover, in which they were to eat unleavened bread and no leaven was to be found in their houses.

The Passover celebration became more complex and attracted many traditions following these simple origins. Indeed, modern Jews acknowledge three different Passovers: the one time, un-repeatable *Egyptian Passover*, the Passover sporadically celebrated during the period of the monarchy, and the *Passover of the Generations*, continuously celebrated for the past two thousand years and more. At the time of Christ, the Jews seemed to have reclined at table in the Roman manner and ate lettuce or parsley dipped in salt water as a pre-dining *hors d'oeuvre*. Likewise, at some point developed the symbolic drinking of several cups of wine, possibly three in the first century A. D. and later on four. The after dinner *afikomen*, derived probably from a Greek word for dessert, eventually became one of the three flat unleavened cakes baked and withheld until after the meal.

No one knows exactly when all the ceremonies, prayers, food items, and songs of the modern Passover Seder first began. Many of them are no doubt ancient, based upon what we can learn from the third century A. D. *Mishnah*. Today, prayers are prayed and hymns are sung. The pre-meal *karpas* is today usually lettuce dipped in salt. Four small cups of wine are consumed. The meaning of the wine, not found in the biblical Passover narrative, is understood differently in different Jewish traditions. Most understand the wine to represent joy of redemption, although there is an ancient tradition among some Jews relating the wine to the blood of the Passover lamb. Three flat, unleavened cakes of *matzoh* are eaten in stages during the meal. All understand these to be symbolic of the exodus. The *haroseth*, an apple sauce, cinnamon sticks, and raisin dish, is a staple in a modern observance, symbolizing the bricks and mortar the Israelites made in Egypt. The *maror*, or bitter herbs, often include horseradish paste, parsley, radishes, or endives, and are eaten with *matzoh* as a kind of sandwich. They symbolize the bitterness of Israel's service in Egypt. Lamb is not always eaten at a modern Jewish Seder; rather, the shank bone of a lamb is displayed

prominently on the Passover plate. This is because of the lack of temple sacrifices and the ability to sacrifice the lamb to be consumed. Also, the Passover plate includes a hard boiled egg, symbolizing a temple sacrifice, the *hagiga*. This egg has come over into modern practice at Easter and was originally known as the *pasche* or Passover egg. Modern Jews still recline at table or sit relaxed upon cushions in the manner of free men.

The Signposts of Passover

A simple listing of the elements of the Passover does not do justice to their symbolism and power to evoke memory and constitute a community of faith. This morning I want to focus upon four signposts which point to the significance of the Passover: the Passover as *memorial*, the Passover as *identification*, the Passover as *torah* or instruction, and the Passover as *eschatological feast*.

The first is the Passover as a *memorial*. This is the simplest level of understanding the Passover. The Israelites were to remember the events which the Passover commemorated, for

Moses said to the people, “Remember this day, in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage, for by strength of hand the Lord brought you out from this place; no leavened bread shall be eaten.” (Ex 13:3)

The kind of memorial which this represents, however, is not just a “bringing to mind.” Notice the passage just cited. Remembering the Passover and the events of Exodus required more than just cognition. It required *observance*, attention to worship and ethical consequences.

This day shall be for you a memorial day and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as an ordinance forever. (Ex 12:14)

How were the Israelites to remember their bondage and redemption? By observing the memorial, by keeping the feast, by removing all leaven and refraining from eating it during the course of the feast.

The second signpost of the Passover is *identification*. We are told by

mythologists that the nature of ritual is to bring foundational events of the past up close, to re-enact them, to identify with those foundational events. Likewise, no Israelite was to think of the Passover as an event which happened to his ancestors, but rather to *him*, personally.

When your son asks you in time to come, “What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances which the Lord our God has commanded you?”

Then you shall say to your son, “*We* were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt and the Lord brought *us* out of Egypt with a mighty hand.” (Deut 6:20, 21)

The very nature of the Passover is the identification of the participant with the events of the Passover and Exodus through the ritual meal. No Israelite was allowed to exclude himself. Notice a literal translation of the words of Deut 5:2, 3:

The Lord our God made a covenant with *us* at Horeb. *Not* with our fathers did the Lord make this covenant, but with *us, we, these ones, here, today, all of us, alive.*

There are eight qualifications in the last sentence, forcing contemporization and identification with the past. But how can Moses make this claim? On the surface of it, it is absurd. None were alive in the plains of Moab who had experienced the events of Passover and Sinai except for Caleb, Joshua, and Moses. In another sense, however, the fundamental claim of Exodus and Deuteronomy is that each Israelite *must* include him or herself in the company of those in Egypt and Sinai *as if* he or she was in fact present. And so the covenant and ritual are forever renewed, with each generation, each act of participation. As with the covenant renewal of each generation of Israelites, so too with the Passover. The *Mishnah* requires that each Jew confess that it was not our fathers which were in Egypt, but I myself suffered under bondage, was passed over by the destroying angel, and ate hastily of the Passover meal. Jews were not allowed to make the celebration of the Passover a museum piece or archival oddity. The events of Egypt became forever

contemporary in the identification of Jews with those events through the celebration of the Passover.

The third signpost is that of *instruction*. The Passover was in many ways the most significant of Israel's festivals. It celebrated the greatest act of redemption in the Old Testament, which led to the constitution of Israel as the people of God. The story of that Passover and redemption had to be *told*, it had to be repeated and taught to each new generation of Israelites. It did this through the Passover *haggadah*, the recitation of the story of Passover, songs, prayers, and the consumption of symbolic foods. The central part of the Passover Seder is the asking of the four questions by the youngest child present and the responses which are given. The celebration of the Passover is highly pedagogical. It is intended to pass on the faith of those who were also "in Egypt" to each successive generation of Israelites.

The final signpost pointing to the significance of Passover is that it was an *eschatological feast*. I use eschatological here to mean that from the earliest times, Passover looked not only to the past as a memorial, not only to the present as instruction, but also to the future in hope. Ex 12:42 says

It was a night of watching by the Lord, to bring them out of the land of Egypt; so this same night is a night of watching kept to the Lord by all the people of Israel throughout their generations.

As the Israelites maintained a vigil on Passover night, awaiting the coming day and their redemption from Egyptian bondage, so too Jews of every age have celebrated the Passover as a night of watching and expectation of coming redemption. In modern celebrations, a place is set for Elijah and the door is left open for him, should he appear. For hundreds of years, the phrase "Next year in Jerusalem!" has been intoned. The Passover looks forward to coming redemption as well as to the past.

The Passover and the Lord's Supper

Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper during the Passover meal he celebrated

with his disciples. Without going into needless detail, several elements of the Passover Seder as described in the *Mishnah* are present in the Synoptic accounts. The bread which he broke was, of course, the *matzoh* of the Passover meal. The sop in which he dipped was probably the salt water, dipped into with the *karpas*. The cup which he blessed was probably the third cup, after the meal, the most holy one of redemption. It is interesting that there is no washing of hands recorded in the Synoptics, an integral part of the Passover; instead, Jesus washed the disciples' feet. Psalms and other songs, especially the *Hallel* of Psalms 113–118, were sung at Passover since antiquity and this is also mentioned in the Gospel account.

But there are important differences. Some have contended that Jesus is not reinterpreting the Passover elements at all, but rather the Hebrew blessing at the end of a meal. The Passover was indeed a meal and Jesus did indeed institute the Supper during the celebration of the Passover. It seems clear to me that Jesus took some of the available imagery from the Passover and reinterpreted them in light of his own act of redemption.

First, Jesus took the unleavened bread and broke it. He also redefined its meaning: “This is my body, given for you.” The bread symbolized the haste with which the Israelites left Egypt and was symbolic of the exodus event itself. In a real way, through his sacrifice Jesus himself became the new way out, the exodus, from spiritual bondage. Allusion is made to this in Luke 9:31, which speaks of Jesus' *exodus* which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem.

The cup after dinner likewise he blessed and commanded them to drink it saying in Matthew 26, “this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” There are two possibilities for this association of Jesus' own blood with the Passover cup. First, the cup was understood to symbolize joy and salvation and the third cup was called the “cup of redemption.” Some ancient Passover traditions also associate the

wine of the Passover with the blood of the Passover lamb, although this was not universally understood. In other words, the cup symbolized joy and redemption and in some circles the sacrificial blood of the Passover lamb.

While these ideas may be in some ways illumine Jesus' appropriation of the wine, he quotes a passage from another context than that directly relating to Passover. In Ex 24:8, Moses institutes the covenant at Sinai with these words:

And Moses took the blood and threw it upon the people, and said, "This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words."

In taking the cup of redemption, Jesus reinterpreted it and connected it with the ratification in blood of the Sinai covenant. In like manner, his blood instituted a new covenant, a covenant also ratified with sacrifice. Perhaps it is significant that Jesus reinterpreted two elements of the Passover as relating to a new exodus from bondage and a new covenant in his own blood.

What of the four signposts of the Passover? How do they relate to the Christian observance of the Lord's Supper? I think much in every way. If Jesus is understood to be our Paschal lamb, then analogously the Lord's Supper is a kind of Passover meal. We observe it as a *memorial*, first of all. Luke 22:9 says this in the most familiar manner:

And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this *in remembrance* of me."

1 Corinthians 11 suggests that the memorial involves self examination and has ethical consequences.

Likewise, the Lord's Supper implies an *identification* with the events of Jesus' death and resurrection. In the same way that Jews were not at liberty to trivialize the Passover by making it ancient, irrelevant history, so followers of Jesus are brought near to his sacrifice through the participation in the Lord's Supper:

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? (1 Cor 10:16)

The old spiritual asks, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” We, like the Passover celebrants of old must say, “Yes, we were there!” And through the participation in the one body of Christ we proclaim ourselves one body of believers as well.

The Lord’s Supper is also *pedagogical*. Paul says in 1 Corinthians,

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread.

Like the Passover feast, the Lord’s Supper is intended to be passed on. It is part of the Christian Torah: we teach and proclaim through it’s observance. The Lord’s Supper is one of the most significant ways of passing on the faith and connects us with believers in the past and those who will come after us. Note the closing lines from the hymn “In Christ Redeemed, in Christ Restored”:

And thus that dark betrayal night,
With the last advent we unite
By one bright chain of loving rite
Until he come.

Finally, the Lord’s Supper is an *eschatological feast*. Paul says it best in 1 Cor 11:26:

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

For us, too, the meal is one of eager expectation and waiting. For us, too, it is the down payment on the eschatological banquet to come. The periodic observance of the Lord’s supper is a proclamation of a past redemption with future orientation. We proclaim what happened in the past because it has implications for our present and our future.

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