

PASSOVER AND THE LAST SUPPER

A COMMENTARY [13 APRIL 2006]

TORAH READING: Ex. 12:21-51

HAFTARAH READING: Josh. 5:2-6:1

“You shall observe this as an institution for all time, for you and for your descendants... and when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this rite?’ you shall say, ‘It is the passover sacrifice of the LORD, because he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses’” (Ex. 12:24,26-27).

The 1975 Vatican “*Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate, No.4*” encouraged Christians to “strive to acquire a better knowledge of the basic components of the religious tradition of Judaism; they must strive to learn by what essential traits Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience.”

This year on April 13 two religious faiths will celebrate two great feasts in their respective liturgical calendars. Each feast has a common root in the deep religious understanding that God intervenes in the experience of humanity in profound ways that affect the way we define ourselves in relation to God. April 13th is the first Day of Pesach. On the evening before (*erev Pesach*, April 12th) every Jewish family will gather together and recount their story of redemption during a Passover Seder. On April 13th in the evening, Christian communities will gather to celebrate the ‘Mass of the Lord’s Supper’ which is “the memorial of the institution of the Eucharist, that is the memorial of the Lord’s Passover,” which Mass “is to be celebrated in the evening with the full participation of the whole community” (Rubrics, *Daily Roman Missal*, 1998).

The Mass of the Lord’s Supper, celebrated on Holy Thursday is rooted in the Passover story of Exodus. With Passover central to Christian interpretation of events in the final days of Jesus’ life, it is important that those events, portrayed as they are in the context of his Jewish tradition, are encountered with an understanding of those events from the perspective of the religious tradition of Judaism itself.

THE PASSOVER OF THE JEWS

Historical criticism finds the roots of the Passover in two major festivals of Israelite tradition. The festival of *Matzot* (Unleavened Bread) and the Passover festival (which most likely had its roots in the offering of the first born of the flocks) merged sometime during the Rabbinic Period. With the passage of time these two festivals focused religious consciousness on God’s compassion for Israel so that the story of slavery and redemption, as related in the Book of Exodus and reinterpreted and articulated through the tradition of Judaism, became *the decisive* redemptive moment that ‘berthed’ Israel. By placing the Exodus story in the context of religious history what emerged is a decisive point in religious self understanding by which Israel defines itself in relationship with God.

The biblical injunction, “You shall observe this institution for all time” (Ex 12:24), draws the community of Israel into a ‘timeless’ consciousness of an experience of slavery and redemption that is at once re-lived in ‘historical’ *Mitzrayim* (Egypt), and known in everyday realities. The experience of slavery, whether physical or of the mind, experienced today or in history, becomes a lived reality that one must experience in order to comprehend the redemptive power of God’s intervention in human history.

This *erev Pesach*, when the community of Israel gathers, family by family, and relives the experience of redemption it will be as though each person is herself or himself back in *Mitzrayim* experiencing the ignominy and powerlessness of slavery and is once more miraculously ‘drawn out’ of servitude by the power of God’s compassion. The story is retold, according to the biblical injunction, as though the LORD had done this miraculous deed for ‘us’—the LORD “*saved our houses*”. The use of the 1st person plural underscores ‘our today’ participation in this saving act of God.

This week, gathered around the Seder table, every family, and every participant, is united in a chain of ‘in the present’ redemptions that stem from the historical memory and continue through the

individual and communal stories of Israel to the present moment and, in the experience of faith, projects into the future.

Studies of the festival of Passover in the Rabbinic Period (200 BCE—200 CE) clarify the nature of the festival in Temple times. The Passover lambs sacrificed by the people in the Temple (until 70 CE) became the communal Passover meal around which the story of redemption was retold. The *Mishnah* (Tractate Pesachim) preserves the ancient order of the Passover Seder: 1. The eating of the meal with its symbolic foods; 2. The questions that invoke the telling; and 3. The retelling of the story. According to Rabban Gamaliel three things must be explained: the Passover, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs (Pesachim 10.5).

The retelling (the *haggadah*) was ceremoniously related over the 2nd cup of wine of the meal and ended with the reciting of the first part of the Hallel (Ps. 113-18). With the re-telling the cup of wine, becomes a means of internalizing the story for it is at the end of the *haggadah* that the 2nd cup of wine was consumed. The Passover meal ended with benedictions and the singing of the last part of the Hallel (cf. the hymn of Mt. 26:30).

The function of the Passover Seder in rabbinic times, and still today, is that every person “in every generation must regard oneself as having personally come forth out of *Mitzrayim*, for it is written, ‘And you shall tell your children on that day saying, It is because of that which the LORD did for *me* when I came forth out of *Mitzrayim* (Ex 13:8)’” (Pesachim 10.5).

THE SETTING OF THE LORD’S SUPPER

According to the synoptic gospels the disciples and Jesus gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover Seder in accordance with their tradition. At the Seder they would have followed the Law and rubrics that were a part of the celebration of the festival. The *haggadah* would have been for them, as it was for all Jews then, and still today, the retelling of a redemptive event that continues to have its moment in history. As the story was told over the cup of wine each would have participated fully in, not only the ‘historical redemption’, but their ongoing experience of God’s redemptive activity.

Mark’s version of Jesus’ Passover Seder contains Gamaliel’s essential elements. The disciples dip their bread into the bowl (14:20) and the story is told over the Cup of Wine—the bread is *matzah* (unleavened bread) and in the bowl is *haroset*, a sweet mix which together with bitter herbs brings to mind the bitterness of slavery and the sweetness of redemption. The Cup of Wine and the *matzah* are ritual elements in a Passover meal.

For each participant in the Seder, the story told over the ‘Cup of Wine’ and the *matzah* is a personal story, rooted in history. It is the story of a ‘life’. When Jesus says “this is my blood” and “this is my body”, it truly is his blood/life story, the story of a life journey from ignominy to glory. Later reflection, and a developing Christology, has emphasized Jesus’ encounter with his own life and its impact on his disciples. Study of the Jewish Passover is important, not only because such study underscores a theology of redemption in Jewish tradition that is the root of its inclusion in the Jesus story, but because this whole ‘Redemption from Egypt story’ is a fundamental part of our own lived human experience.

DISCUSSION TOPICS: [1] Scholars have noted the ‘tripartite formula’ used for teaching methodology in the biblical text. The pattern is as follows. 1. Unusual action, 2. A question prompted by the unusual act, and 3. the subsequent teaching opportunity. This tripartite formula is apparent in the Passover Seder where the unusual elements of the meal provoke the questions, i.e., “Why do we eat bitter herbs, and only unleavened bread tonight?” This tripartite form also appears in the New Testament. Discuss the use of this genre in the synoptic gospels in relation to Jesus’ actions during the Passover Seder. [2] Christians must study the Passover in its own context in order to understand the synoptic “Last Supper” pericopes.

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