

The Last Supper Cup

I want to tackle a very important issue regarding the Lord's last meal, when he made the ever-popular statement, "Take. Eat. This is My body . . . This is My blood" For hundreds of years this statement has been argued about and people were burned at the stake because of the disagreements. We need to look at what was happening at the time Jesus spoke the words and what the Jewish understanding would have been.

The *Eucharist or Communion or The Lord's Supper*, is the rite that Christians perform in fulfillment of Jesus' instruction, recorded in the New Testament, to do *in memory of him*. It is believed to be a traditional Seder—a Jewish celebration—an acknowledgement—of *Pesach*, or *Passover*. A Jewish family would commemorate Pesach in early spring as a remembrance of Israel's deliverance from Egypt when God *passed over* them and preserved them from His judgment on Egypt (Exodus 12).

ADONAI spoke to Moshe and Aharon in the land of Egypt; he said, You are to begin your calendar with this month; it will be the first month of the year for you. Speak to all the assembly of Isra'el and say, 'On the tenth day of this month, each man is to take a lamb for his family, one per household—except if the household is too small for a whole lamb, then he and his next-door neighbor should share one, dividing it in proportion to the number of people eating it.

Your animal must be without defect, a male in its first year, and you may choose it from either the sheep or the goats. You are to keep it until the fourteenth day of the month, and then the entire assembly of the community of Isra'el will slaughter it at dusk.

They are to take some of the blood and smear it on the two sides and top of the door-frame at the entrance of the house in which they eat it. That night, they are to eat the meat, roasted in the fire; they are to eat it with matzah¹ and maror² Don't eat it raw or boiled, but roasted in the fire, with its head, the lower parts of its legs and its inner organs. Let nothing of it remain till morning; if any of it does remain, burn it up completely.

'Here is how you are to eat it: with your belt fastened, your shoes on your feet and your staff in your hand; and you are to eat it hurriedly. It is ADONAI's Pesach (Passover). For that night, I will pass through the land of Egypt and kill all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both men and animals; and I will execute judgment against all the gods of Egypt; I

¹ Unleavened bread—because they had no time to wait for their bread to rise, so they were to bake it before it had a chance to rise. It is also important to note that in scripture, leaven—or yeast—symbolizes sin.

² Bitter herbs—because of the bitter lives they experienced as slaves in Egypt

am ADONAI. The blood will serve you as a sign marking the houses where you are; when I see the blood, I will pass over (Hebrew: pasach) you—when I strike the land of Egypt, the death blow will not strike you.

‘This will be a day for you to remember and celebrate as a festival to ADONAI; from generation to generation you are to celebrate it by a perpetual regulation. For seven days you are to eat matzah—on the first day remove the leaven from your houses. For whoever eats hametz (leavened bread—remember that leaven symbolizes sin) from the first to the seventh day is to be cut off from Isra’el. On the first and seventh days, you are to have an assembly set aside for God. On these days no work is to be done, except what each must do to prepare his food; you may do only that.

You are to observe the festival of matzah, for on this very day I brought your divisions out of the land of Egypt. Therefore, you are to observe this day from generation to generation by a perpetual regulation. From the evening of the fourteenth day of the first month until the evening of the twenty-first day, you are to eat matzah. During those seven days, no leaven is to be found in your houses. Whoever eats food with hametz in it is to be cut off from the community of Isra’el— it doesn’t matter whether he is a foreigner or a citizen of the land. Eat nothing with hametz in it. Wherever you live, eat matzah.’ (Exodus 12:1-21 Complete Jewish Bible)

This event fulfills God’s promise to deliver them from the control and captivity of the Egyptians (Exodus 6:6-7). According to the Talmud³ and the Mishnah⁴, the Jews associated four cups of wine with this promise:

- Cup 1 "I will bring you out" [deliverance]
- Cup 2 "I will rid you of their bondage" [freedom]
- Cup 3 "I will redeem you" [redemption]
- Cup 4 "I will take you for my people and I will be your God" [consummation]

Even “the poorest in Israel . . . must not give them less than four cups of wine to drink” (Mishnah, *Pesachim* 10:1). Why wine? Because it “makes glad the heart of man” (Psalm 104.15; Tosefta, *Pesachim* 10.4) and as such is suitable to commemorate freedom.

³ The *Talmud* is a record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, customs and history. The Talmud has two components: the Mishnah (see next note), which is the first written compendium of Judaism's Oral Law; and the Gemara, a discussion of the Mishnah and related Tannic writings..

⁴ The *Mishnah* (Hebrew: “repetition”) is a major source of rabbinic Judaism’s religious texts. It is the first recording of the oral law of the Jewish people, as championed by the Pharisees and is considered the first work of Rabbinic Judaism.

In the Jewish mind, the third cup of redemption came to be associated with the coming of Elijah and the expectation of the Messiah. Others put aside a 5th cup for Elijah. This cup was saved for the end of the meal. Notice this in the 14th chapter of Mark:

22When they finished eating, He took a loaf of bread [which always accompanied the cups of wine], praised God and gave thanks [gave a “Eucharistic^{5, 6}” prayer of thanksgiving] and asked Him to bless it to their use. Then He broke it and gave to them and said, Take. Eat. This is My body.

The bread was unleavened, because leaven symbolized sin.

23He also took a cup,⁷ and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, and they all drank of it.

24And He said to them, This is My blood which ratifies the new covenant, the blood which is being poured out for on account of many.

Remember, in the Jewish tradition, the third cup represented Elijah. The bread that accompanied the cup also symbolized the body of Elijah—or the coming messiah. However, when Jesus lifted the third cup, he straightened out their misunderstanding by proclaiming, “this is the cup of my blood.” In other words, “Guys, all these years you thought this referred to Elijah, but it refers to me!”

“Here is how you are to eat it [the roasted lamb]: with your belt fastened, your shoes on your feet and your staff in your hand; and you are to eat it hurriedly. It is ADONAI’s Pesach (Passover). For that night, I will pass through the land of Egypt and kill all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both men and animals; and I will execute judgment against all the gods of Egypt; I am ADONAI. The blood will serve you as a sign marking the houses where you are; when I see the blood, I will pass over (Hebrew: pasach) you—when I strike the land of Egypt, the death blow will not strike you. This will be a day for you to remember and celebrate as a

⁵The word "Eucharist" comes from the Greek noun, "eucharistia"), meaning *thanksgiving*. This noun or the corresponding verb, *to give thanks* is found in 55 verses of the New Testament. Four of these verses recount that Jesus “gave thanks” before presenting to his followers the bread and the wine that he declared to be his body and his blood.

Some Christians classify the Eucharist as a sacrament, but Protestants avoid the term *sacrament*, preferring ordinance. In these traditions, the ceremony is seen not as a specific channel of divine grace—, which comes by means of the believer’s faith and God’s generosity—but as an expression of faith and obedience of the Christian community.

⁶ In the early church they would have “common” (Greek: *Kononia*) meals during their celebration: often referred to as Agape (Love) Feasts. During the celebration they would offer a prayer of thanksgiving—a Eucharistic prayer. During these gatherings of Christian believers, they would also celebrate communion—it eventually became known as the Eucharist meal. Over time and habit, I suppose, the elements of the communion themselves, became known as the Eucharist.

⁷ Because this “Last” meal of Jesus’ is believed to be a traditional Seder, we need to understand what was happening. Because the third cup of the Seder is the cup of Redemption, it is probable that Jesus picked this cup—along with the associated bread when he said, “This is the cup of my blood.”

festival to ADONAI; from generation to generation you are to celebrate it by a perpetual regulation.” (Exodus 12:11-14 Complete Jewish Bible)

This night was to be different from all other nights. God Himself would ‘pass over’ whichever house the blood was smeared on their doorpost. This was not an atonement sacrifice. The Israelites had not sinned. This was pure deliverance from their circumstance. The yoke of Egypt and slavery was about to be thrown off and the demonic gods of Egypt judged.

In the Talmud, some Jewish sources say that the Israelites were worshipping idols in Egypt, along with the Egyptians. Moses called them to come “away from the idols which you are worshipping with the Egyptians, the calves and lambs of stone and metal, and with one of these same animals, through which you sin, prepare to fulfill the commandments of your God. The planet sign of the month *Nisan* (Aries: Ram) is a lamb; and just to make sure the Egyptians did not think that it was through the powers of the lamb they threw off the yoke of slavery, God commanded His people to take a lamb and eat it. They were commanded to roast it whole and not to break any bones, so that the Egyptians might know that it was indeed a lamb which they had consumed.”⁸

Now let us look at the preparation of the Passover meal.

10th Nisan⁹ Mar/Apr they would purchase the Passover lamb (Exodus 12:3-6)

14th Nisan Mar/Apr they would consume the Passover Feast (Exodus 12:6).

15th-21st Nisan Mar/Apr Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12:18; 13:3).

A Sunday, Nisan Mar/Apr Firstfruits Leviticus 23:9-14

The gospels mention the first day of unleavened bread and the disciples’ preparation of a full Passover meal. This included (according to Exodus 12) *the purchase of the lamb on Nisan 10 for each household*.¹⁰

Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him. “But not during the Feast,” they said, “or the people may riot” . . . On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus’ disciples asked him, “Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?”

So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Say to the owner of the

⁸ quoted in *Hebraic Literature*

⁹ *Abib* in Hebrew, subsequently the months adopted the Babylonian names above

¹⁰ Interestingly, if an Egyptian smeared blood on his house, also, he could have been saved. This judgment was without national distinction. As significant as this is, it also speaks of corporate family salvation not like our over-concentration on the individual. Compare that to the account of the Philippian jailer’s conversion, or that of Lydia, in Acts when they baptized their whole families.

house he enters, “The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?” He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.” (Mark 14:1-2, 12-15)

On Nisan 14/15—after having been set aside for 4 days—*the lamb is killed and the flesh is eaten* with the unleavened bread.

That night, they are to eat the meat, roasted in the fire; they are to eat it with matzah (unleavened bread) and maror (bitter herbs). (Exodus 12:8)

The original Passover feast was to be kept “to the Lord . . . throughout your generations . . . by an everlasting ordinance . . . forever” (Exodus 12:14, 24), now whether this *everlasting* requirement is fulfilled with the Lord's Supper or only in the continuance of Passover proper is debatable.

The ongoing celebration of Passover was unique to Israel because no foreigner was allowed to eat it (Exodus 12:43, 45) although, a *circumcised* servant or *foreigner* could. Passover was only to be kept by those in *covenant relationship*, symbolized by circumcision. It may be that the celebration of the Passover was maintained by the early church, because Paul wrote to all the Corinthians (5:7-8), Jews and Gentiles, to *keep the feast* (literally, "go on keeping the feast") in sincerity and truth not with the leaven of immorality and sin. This may also imply that the entire Christian life is a Passover feast and that leaven or sin should always be removed. It could also imply that some were neglecting the feast, seeing it as an element of Judaism not Messianism (Christianity).

The famous feature in the celebration of modern Passovers is the removal of leaven (*châmêts*) from the house. Jesus used leaven to refer to either false teaching or the hypocrisy of not keeping true teaching (Matthew 16:6-12; Mark 6:14-28; 8:15; Luke 12:1). The unleavened bread signified not only purity but also being in a state of readiness or *haste to leave*.

The Passover *Seder* service includes the dipping of the *karpas* (vegetable) dipped in salt water and the bitter herbs (*maror*) dipped in a paste of fruit, nuts, wine and spices (*charoset*). Since some of these dishes are not specifically mentioned in the gospels they may not have come into the *Seder* until after Jesus' time. Nevertheless, *the bitter herbs* are specifically Biblical and mentioned in Exodus 12:8:

“and with bitter herbs they shall eat it”

Whatever, they were expressive of the bitter afflictions of the children of Isra'el in Egypt.

Regarding the roasting of the lamb, it was done in a very specific way. According to Jewish writings, a spit made of the wood of pomegranate is brought and shoved into its mouth. It is specifically a wooden spit, not iron, nor on an iron grate.

A much later Jewish writer, Maimonides, supplies more detail:

"they transfix it through the middle of the mouth to its posteriors, with a wooden spit, and they hang it in the midst of a furnace, and the fire below:"

In other words, it was not turned on a spit but suspended on a hook and roasted by fire underneath, and so Biblical commentators have drawn attention to the fact that it was like Christ suspended, hanging on the cross. The early church writer, Justin Martyr, says that "the lamb was roasted in the form of a cross; one spit, he says, went through from the lower parts to the head, and again another across the shoulders, to which the hands (or rather the legs) of the lamb were fastened and hung; and so was in every way a type of Christ on the cross."¹¹

The lamb was dropped from the Seder when the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70. The use of a roasted lamb or shank-bone of lamb came back in but cooked in a different way to distinguish it from the Passover lamb itself.

The *Hallel* ('praise', Psalms 113-118) is sung on the first service of the three main Jewish feasts and the half *Hallel* is sung on the other days of Passover, because although there was rejoicing for Israel's salvation the Egyptians had to be drowned to provide it and as they are also God's creatures a measure of restraint and remorse is introduced. These psalms/hymns are amongst the most ancient parts of the *Seder* service for the *Mishnah* records discussions between rabbis Hillel and Shammai on their performance and these rabbinic schools of thought were contemporary with Jesus and the apostles.

Rabbi Yaacov Francus provides a little more information regarding this:

The "Hallel" that we say during the Pesach Seder has two unique characteristics: First, it is said at night, even though the mishna in Megilla (20b) lists Hallel as something that is recited during the day. Second, we break it up into two parts - we recite the first part of Hallel right before we drink the second cup of wine, and the rest after the meal before drinking the fourth cup.

After the *Hallel* the *Nishmat*,¹² doxology is recited. This practice also known as *Birkat Ha-Shir* 'Song of Blessing' has been known since Mishnaic times. Some have added to this since, but a curious medieval legend ascribes this Jewish practice to the Apostle Peter!

Traditionally, Jews remain after a Passover meal, or any other for that matter, for many hours *talking about God*. This is not only traditional practice but also the Biblical injunction of Exodus 12.26-27:

¹¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialog. cum Trypho Jud.* p. 259

¹² 'The soul of every living being shall bless Your Name, Hashem, our G-d; the spirit of all flesh shall always glorify and exalt Your remembrance, our King,'

When your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this ceremony?’ say, ‘It is the sacrifice of ADONAI’s Pesach, (Passover) because (ADONAI) passed over the houses of the people of Isra’el in Egypt, when he killed the Egyptians but spared our houses.’” The people of Isra’el bowed their heads and worshipped.

Although the Passover’s retelling and education have become a midrashic expansion and haggadah in their own right. The explanation of the *pesach*, *matzah* and *maror*, was introduced at the end of the 1st century by Rabban Gamliel.

It is also important to understand that eating Passover is considered to be not a *memorial* but a *reliving*. Hebrew allows for this since it had no word for history and its verbs do not properly distinguish between past and present. Modern Hebrew uses *historiah* borrowed from the Greek. Classical Hebrew used the word and concept of memory. “History is what happened to someone else. Memory is what happened to me.”¹³ Memory is *zêkher* in Hebrew and relates to the concepts of preserving a family line through male descendants, memorials, remembrance and the having of a name. To blot out the name of someone (*e.g.*, the Amalekites, is to blot out their memory). Hebrew also uses *tol’dhoth* (generations, descendants).

“The most important gift one generation can give to the next is the knowledge of the journey those before us took, and the sacrifices they had to make, to bring us to where we are. Without that knowledge, we travel blindly. If we forget what our parents fought for, we may have to fight for it again. Hindsight is the necessary tutor of foresight.”¹⁴

The whole meal-celebration is carried out while *reclining together*. Reclining is a mark of a *freeman* at a great feast. In fact, when the Jewish child asks the traditional questions at Passover, one of them is “why do we recline and not sit on this night?” If, as it seems, the last supper was a Passover meal then it is very unlikely to have looked anything like medieval paintings since they would not have been seated around a table. Another surprise to Christians is that wives and children may well have been there too, not just male disciples—since it is inconceivable that the wives and children were at home celebrating their own Passovers. Passover is a feast that celebrates redemption of whole households and a nation, not individuals. This would of course have depended upon how many of Jesus’ disciples’ families had come up to Jerusalem for the festival.

The *bread and wine* were separate elements of the meal-celebration. *Grace* would often precede and/or follow the meal, *the bread* would be taken as part of the meal, which would then continue to completion. The symbolism in the bread is not so much in the broken body of Jesus but in the promise of his continuing presence and the disciples’ future unity, “we are one body, just as we partake of one bread.” As I mentioned earlier, its *unleavened* nature is often associated with sin and its rooting out, but more historically

¹³ Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi, *The Times*, 22 April 1995

¹⁴ Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi, *The Times*, 6 May 1995

unleavened bread is that which is baked without time to rise and indicated the preparedness to leave Egypt and thus is symbolical of haste and readiness (Exodus 12.11).

The latest addition to some modern Passovers is an *orange* of all things. This is a protest symbol for those that believe in women's ministry in Judaism since a Jew recently commented that a woman belongs in the rabbinic pulpit about as much as an orange belongs on the Passover Seder plate!

According to Scripture, Jesus kept Passover as a child and an adult (Luke 2.41-43; Mark 14.12-26; John 12.12). Mark 14.12 (cf. Matthew 26; Luke 22) shows that the last supper was a Passover meal.

"his disciples said to him, where do you want us to go and prepare, that you may eat the Passover" (Mark 14.12)

It was Thursday morning and the Passover was to be slain after the middle of the day, "between the two evenings," and eaten in Jerusalem at night. The disciples were still at Bethany, 2 miles from the city. Jerusalem freely loaned out rooms on festival nights so that all those on pilgrimage to the city might be able to celebrate the feasts properly.

Now most Christians think of the last supper as more of a symbolic communion Eucharist than a full festal meal. Given this, we often miss the full meaning of the Passover and the additional meaning Jesus gave to it.

The gospel accounts of the last supper begin with the search for a venue and the lamb. However, the familiar terms paschal lamb and Passover lamb may mean different things. *Paschô* is Greek for 'to suffer' whereas *pesach* means 'to pass over,' presumably *pascha* is a Greek transliteration of the Aramaic or Hebrew for 'Passover.' Whether this was wordplay or a linguistic mistake the association of the Passover lamb (Exodus 12) together with the suffering lamb (Isaiah 53) has stuck. Lambs for atonement for sin were also a part of Jewish practice. The three lambs together signify: freedom through suffering as an atonement for sin. Paul cites Jesus as *our Passover* (1 Corinthians 5.7), the word *lamb* is not in the Greek, for indeed the sacrifice could be a lamb.

I mentioned this earlier, but I want to look at it from another angle. Judaism associates 4 or 5 cups of wine, not just one, with Passover. In Luke's account of this supper, they drink wine at least twice, at the beginning and end of the meal. It is most likely that the last supper *cup* of wine is to be associated with the third Passover cup—that of redemption (Exodus 6.6), associated with the coming of Elijah and eschatological expectation of the Messiah. "After supper" (1 Corinthians 11.25) the cup of red wine mixed with water would be taken and shared together from the same cup. It, like the sharing from one loaf, was symbolic of *togetherness*, freedom and fellowship in a covenant. The wine and water were later taken as symbolic of the blood and water that flowed from Jesus' side. Mishnah, Berakoth, 7.5 cites the adding of water to wine in the time of Jesus.

The fourth cup, of consummation, Jesus declined to drink (Matthew 26.29; Mark 14.25; and Mishnah, Pesachim 10.7, “between the third and fourth cups he may not drink”) until his return and consummation of the kingdom. What he is saying is that redemption history had moved on from the exodus and into the realms of this new covenant,¹⁵ though it did not negate the Passover celebration for the Jews themselves, Jewish Christians now had additional reasons to celebrate on this auspicious occasion. Revelation 21 speaks of God finally taking us to be His people in the fullest possible sense of consummation and echoing Exodus 6.7 “And I will take you to Me for a people, and I will be to you a God.”

The dipping of bitter herbs or other foods may be mentioned in the gospel accounts of the last supper, or it may be only the dipping of bread. ‘Dipping in the bowl’ is referred to in Matthew 26.23 and in Mark 14.20 this is specifically ‘dipping the bread.’

Jesus’ last supper concluded with the singing of hymns (Matthew 26.30; Mark 14.26), possibly the second half of the *Hallel* (Psalms 113-118) traditionally associated with Passover.

Like the Passover injunction to educate at the feast through the retelling of history the last supper accounts show that Jesus’ self-disclosed and preferred title is teacher or *master* (cf. Matthew 23.8,10; Mark 10.17; John 3.2; 13.13,14; *didaskolos* is used of Jesus more than 40 times and *rabbi* about 15 times). According to John’s gospel chapters 13-17 Jesus teaches many things in the context of a final meal. In the early church this carried through into the fellowship meetings (e.g., Acts 2.42; 20.7) where breaking of bread and teaching were part of the corporate meal-meeting event.

The constant *state of readiness* of the Passover (Exodus 12.11) is repeated in the fact that the last supper precede Jesus’ imminent arrest and his being taken away from them and the *Eucharist* proclaims the Lord’s death until He comes again (1 Corinthians 11.26). Jesus’ second coming is described as being like a thief in the night and the time of the Exodus deliverance was at night (Deuteronomy 16.1).

It is interesting that Hebrews 11:28 regards Moses’ keeping of the Passover as an act of faith, not ritual. It was direct trust in God’s means of salvation from Egypt however illogical it may have seemed at the time.

So, the last supper was a full fellowship meal, looking back on the exodus and immediately forward to the crucifixion and ultimately towards the *parousia* (the second coming) and messianic banquet/kingdom consummation (cf. Isaiah 25.6-9). This is the reason the early church continued to observe it, eventually splitting the Agape (love feast) from the more symbolic last supper/eucharist, perhaps because of the kind of excess mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11.17-22. The synagogues also had two meal occasions, the full assembly meal and the household Sabbath meals where each family would arrange their own company, early Christians might have been able to arrange exclusively

¹⁵ It is interesting that in some N.T. manuscripts the word *new* is missing from *new covenant* in the last supper accounts of “this is my blood of the new covenant.”

Christian Sabbath meals. In the end, the Agape was forgotten and the eucharist became more formal, central and even *magical* in the later doctrine of *transubstantiation*. The Passover symbolism is mostly lost on gentile believers. Jesus was the ultimate Passover [lamb] (1 Corinthians 5.7) and as such died with all his bones intact (cf. Exodus 12.46; Numbers 9.12; Psalm 34.20). Jewish Passover is considered to be the ‘eating of history’ and the treasuring of freedom through education and enactment and is a joyful occasion, the church all too readily emphasizes the morbid death of Christ not his joyous resurrection or return. Indeed, 1 Corinthians 11.26 describes the purpose of the meal as proclaiming “the Lord’s death till he comes.”

We should probably take note of some apparent differences between John’s gospel and the synoptics. John is distinct amongst the gospels for basing his record of Jesus’ ministry around three Passovers (John 2:13,23; 6:4; 11:55; 12:1; 13:1; 18:28, 39; 19:14). For him Passover was significant, for the synoptic gospels and modern scholars it was chronologically problematic!

John 19.14 mentions the “day of preparation of Passover” as the timing for Jesus’ trial yet the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) speak of a Passover last supper already having taken place. Skeptics have seen in this apparent discrepancy a reason to doubt either the crucifixion accounts themselves or the Passover origins of the last supper and later Eucharist (communion).

Passover was a weeklong festival, not a single day. The only hint at the idea of preparation comes at the beginning of the week when the “lamb is set aside for four days.” If this were the day, that would make the eating of the Passover lamb an event in the week following Jesus crucifixion and resurrection, losing all the prophetic symbolism and fulfillment. Further, there is no such day as “preparation of Passover” in Old Testament or Jewish literature.

However, “the day of preparation” is a description of the day before Sabbath, our Friday, ending at about 6pm, when the Sabbath began. The gospels sometimes call it “the day of the preparation” or just “the preparation” (Matthew 27.62; Luke 23.54; John 19.31) or sometimes the “Jews’ preparation day” (John 19.42) and it is explained by Mark (15.42) as “It was the preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath.”

A Jewish tradition expects Israel’s messianic deliverance to be on 15th Nisan, the day after Passover, which would fit with Jesus’ crucifixion on the day after Passover, the preparation of the Sabbath:

“on the same day, the fifteenth of Nisan, Israel is to be redeemed, in the days of the Messiah, as they were redeemed on that day, as it is said, according to the days” (Cabalistae apud Fagium in loc. cf. Micah 7.15)

Now an important question arises as whether the last supper was a Passover Seder (order) meal (synoptic accounts) or some other special meal (some interpretations of John’s account), if the latter, it may have been similar to that of a Chaburah (from chaber = ‘a

friend'). This was the formal supper of family or community groups banded together for devotional or pious purposes.

Both Judaism and early Jewish Christianity placed considerable emphasis on fellowship around feasting and food. Indeed, Jesus was termed a 'glutton and winebibber' for his regular meal table fellowship and evangelism. His parables also contain several references to food and feasts. The miracles often contained the 'food' provision element too, e.g., the water into wine, feedings of 4000 and 5000 etc.

If we ditch the Passover symbolism though, we lose its salvation/deliverance typology. However, if we add to it rather than replace it with the *Chaburah* then we gain the first meal of a new community of faith, a fellowship meal of those committed to each other.

It is an unfortunate aspect of Eucharistic history that 'eating the bread' and 'blessing God' has become 'blessing the bread' and 'eating God.' In churches, Catholic and Protestant alike, the bread and wine are blessed, and in Catholic ones the bread is believed to become the very body of Christ/God (transubstantiation). This doctrine of blessed bread and transubstantiation can be traced back as early as Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 150; Apology, 1.66.1-2) and Ignatius (c. A.D. 110; to the Smyrnaeans 7), although the strict term *transubstantiation* was not in use until the 12th-13th centuries. Transubstantiation was particularly odious to the Jews and to the docetists¹⁶ who would have no part of it.

For a Jew, to bless the bread *itself*, would have been equally unthinkable. It was God Himself who was blessed. If one peruses the New Testament accounts of the Last Supper and of the miraculous feedings it is apparent that the text usually reads, "and X blessed [it] and broke the bread. . . .," the subject of the blessing is usually added rather than originally present in the text itself. Thus, the 'it' could also be 'Him' or 'God,' to a Jew this would be the most likely reading. In this instance the NIV and RSV offer some of the better translations of e.g., Matthew 26.26; Luke 24.30; Mark 6.41, the NASB, Phillips, KJV and NKJV are incorrect in their implied grammar resulting in the food itself being blessed rather than God. Acts 27.35 records Paul's continuing practice of blessing God before taking food, just as Jesus, both in accordance with Deuteronomy 8:10.

Part of the growing desire to bless and sanctify the Eucharistic elements arose out of Hellenistic dualism. This saw the world divided between matter and spirit, secular and sacred, unholy and holy etc. With this orientation, the material elements of bread and wine, and indeed the vessels themselves, required sanctification and blessing to make them holy, according to the Greek view. This process later spread to all kinds of relics and religious objects.

The Didache¹⁷ probably has the earliest and most faithful Eucharistic blessing that is directed toward God, *not at the bread and wine*, and sees an eschatological symbolism in

¹⁶ An heretical early Christian sect from the Greek verb *dokein* 'to seem to be' wherein Jesus is imagined to have been God who only seemed to be man, as all bodily mortality was despised by docetists.

¹⁷ An early Christian teaching manual including the Jewish teaching 'The Two Ways', dated between A.D.

its celebration, just as the New Testament says that the Lord's death is proclaimed until He comes in the Eucharist.

Jesus and early Jewish Christians used a common Jewish blessing at mealtimes, along these traditional lines:

Barukh attah Adonai Elohenu Melek ha-olam ha-motzi lechem min ha-arets (Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the ages/universe, who brings forth bread from the earth)

Barukh attah Adonai Elohenu Melek ha-olam borê' p'rîy haggâphen (Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the ages/universe, who creates the fruit of the vine)

Often, it was said at the end of the meal (Deuteronomy 8:10) and at the beginning, as well as over the separate elements of a meal. In fact, much of the wording of blessings, graces and Eucharistic prayers, particularly in the Didache, are Jewish in tone and content, indeed they "have almost word for word parallels in Judaism."¹⁸

Eucharist in the Didache:

9. At the Eucharist, offer the Eucharistic prayer in this way. Begin with the cup: 'We give thanks to You, our Father, for the holy vine of Your son David, which You have made known to us through Your Son Jesus,' 'Yours is the glory, for ever and ever.' Then over the broken bread: 'We give thanks to You, our Father, for the life and knowledge You have made known to us through Your Son Jesus.' 'Yours is the glory, for ever and ever.' 'As this broken bread was scattered upon the hills and gathered together and became one loaf, so may Your Church be brought together from the ends of the earth into Your kingdom,' 'Yours is the glory and the power, through Jesus Christ. for ever and ever.' But let no one eat of this Eucharistic thanksgiving, but those who have been baptized into the Name of the Lord; for the Lord's own saying applies here, 'Give not that which is holy to the dogs.'

10. When all have had sufficient, give thanks in these words: 'Thanks be to You, holy Father, for Your sacred Name which you have caused to dwell (tabernacle) in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and immortality which You have revealed to us through Your Son Jesus,' 'Yours is the glory, for ever and ever.' 'You, O Almighty Lord, have created all things for Your own Name's sake; to all men You have given meat and drink to enjoy, that they may give thanks to You, but to us You have graciously given spiritual meat and drink, together with eternal life, through Your Son. But before all things we give You thanks that You are powerful. Yours is the glory, for ever and ever. Remember, Lord. Your

¹⁸ Oscar Cullman, *Early Christian Worship*

Church; to deliver it from all evil and to perfect it in Your love; and gather it together from the four winds - even the Church which You have sanctified - into Your kingdom which You have prepared for it. Yours is the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Let Grace come, and this present world pass away. Hosanna to the God of David, If any man is holy, let him come; if any man is not, let him repent. Maran Atha. Amen.’
But permit the prophets to give thanks as much as they desire . . .

14. And on the Lord’s own day gather yourselves together and break bread and give thanks, first confessing your sins, that your sacrifice may be pure. And do not let anyone who is in dispute with a brother take part until they are reconciled, in order that your sacrifice may not be defiled. For this is the offering of which the Lord said, ‘In every place and at every time offer Me a pure sacrifice; for I am a great king, says the Lord, and My name is wonderful among the nations.’

The Lord’s Supper, communion, or Eucharistic meal, as it appears in the Didache, comes across as more of an Agape love meal. The meal is more than just symbolic bread and wine, the end prayers come after all have eaten to satisfaction, implying a full meal rather than token elements. The emphasis is more on a *fellowship meal* prefiguring a messianic banquet with prayers of thanksgiving for physical and spiritual food and drink in general, for the ingathering of the Church and for the second coming of Jesus. It was an occasion at which the prophets were free to pray as much as they liked. In 1 Corinthians 11 the meal has already become an occasion for greed and divisions and very soon the Agape meal became separated from the more symbolic communion meal. It has been suggested, therefore, that the Didache predates the Corinthian letters.

The prayers at the Eucharistic meal are, overall, simply Christianized Jewish graces. The use of the doxologies (from *doxa*, meaning ‘glory’) is very Jewish and like many of the Psalms. The very Jewish style and vocabulary are early, for later Jewish graces and blessings were banned among Christians. “Let Grace come” and maranatha (Aramaic for “our Lord come”), which are similar in meaning have echoes in 1 Corinthians 16.22 and Revelation 22.20.

The Jewish Passover, Didache (9,10,14) and New Testament last supper accounts all portray a 7 fold action (numerologically significant) within the context of a meal. Meal fellowship and the remembering of sacred history were very important corporate events to the Jewish community. However, the earliest *ecclesiological liturgies* all portray a 4-fold action which “without exception for 1,400 years was prepared to ignore the New Testament on the point” and the reason for which “must be connected in some way with the severance of the Eucharist proper from its original connection with a meal.”¹⁹

Take a look at the 7- fold action:

1. took bread

¹⁹ Oscar Cullman, *Early Christian Worship*

2. gave thanks over it
3. broke it
4. distributed it
- later -
5. took cup
6. gave thanks
7. distributed it

Here is the 4-fold liturgy:

1. offertory - took bread & wine
2. prayer/benediction - giving thanks
3. fraction - breaking of bread
4. communion - distribution of elements

Some of the Early Church variations on some of the elements included:

Bread & water
 Bread & salt
 Bread only

Although some of these took place in what established orthodoxy might call fringe or heretical groups. Nevertheless, they place a greater emphasis on the bread than on the wine. Wine was a later addition to Passover compared to the original symbolism of lamb, bread and bitter herbs. Christians tend to highlight the wine because of its association with the blood. Compare the Eucharistic account in Didache 9 where the wine is mentioned and thanksgiving is offered in a very Jewish style “the holy vine of your son David made known to us in your Son Jesus” but passed over when compared to the symbolism of the bread which is said to offer life and knowledge, i.e., feeds the soul, and its unity is said to represent the coming together of the church as one body.

Some gospel accounts have Jesus saying, “drink this all of you, for this is the *blood* of the covenant . . . for the forgiveness of sins,” other gospels and textual variants add “new” before covenant. Jesus seems to institute an added significance to the bread and wine of Passover.

Only Luke mentions wine before and after the meal and hints at possible allusions to the multiple cups of wine of Jewish Passover.

Here is the suggested order for primitive early church Passover Seder:

Psalm 113 (& 114? - rabbis Hillel and Shammai debated this before Jesus' time)

Kaddish - blessing of God, over wine

Matzah, blessing of God, with unleavened bread lifted up

“This is the bread of affliction which our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt. All who are hungry let them come and eat: all who are needy, let them come and celebrate Passover with us. . .” (the remaining parts of this

blessing were introduced after the time of the 1st century and the Mishnah itself).

Roasted meal with bitter herbs (watercress, coriander, horseradish . . .)

Questions and Answers (no evidence for early origin but cf. Deuteronomy 6.7)

Nishmat doxology recited after Hallel

The door is flung open to admit Elijah and the Messiah. Expectation of 2nd coming. “proclaim his death until he comes.”

More wine

More hymns/Psalms

I want now to say a few words regarding the Christian celebration of Easter.

While Pesach/Passover is celebrated on the 14th Nisan, Easter always takes place on a Sunday—the first Sunday after the full moon following the vernal equinox. However, this was not always the case. In the earliest church, Easter was kept on 14th Nisan, as Passover, and this continued later in minority groups known as quartodecimans. From the mid-4th century, there was a severed link with its Jewish roots and we have the date we have.

The Quartodeciman²⁰ controversy, c.190 A.D., resulted in long and bitter disputes about the proper way to calculate Easter's date. This was the principal point at issue between the Celtic churches of Ireland, Scotland and Wales and the Latin church established in England. Eventually the Roman view triumphed in Western Europe: and Easter we now celebrate (in the words of the *Book of Common Prayer*) on “the first Sunday after the full moon which happens on or next following the 21st of March the Spring Equinox.”

Easter was celebrated at the same time as Passover until 325 A.D (Council of Nicaea), making it effectively an annual last supper event commemorating Passover through crucifixion and resurrection. The reasons for the change were on the surface calendar based. It was thought that the Jewish lunar calendar was inappropriate for Christians. The council of Nicaea in writing to the Egyptian church (12) said,

“the most holy feast of Easter, . . . all the brethren in the East who formerly kept this festival when the Jews did, will henceforth conform to the Romans, to you and to us all who from the earliest time have observed our period of celebrating Easter.”

²⁰ *Quartodecimanism* (“fourteenism,” derived from Latin) refers to the practice of fixing the celebration of Passover for Christians on the fourteenth day of Nisan in the Old Testament’s Hebrew Calendar (for example Leviticus 23:5, in Latin “quarta decima”). This was the original method of fixing the date of the Passover, which is to be a “perpetual ordinance.” According to the Gospel of John (for example John 19:14), this was the Friday that Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem, the Synoptic Gospels place the Friday on 15 Nisan. A controversy arose concerning whether it should also be a resurrection holiday, and thus whether it should instead be celebrated on one particular Sunday each year, which is now the floating holiday that is commonly called Easter Sunday.

At Antioch the church kept Easter on 14 Nisan, as the Jews. At Alexandria in Egypt, they calculated the date according to their own reckoning. The church eventually settled on the Alexandrian and Roman custom. However, Ephesus and the traditions of the apostle John, the evangelist Philip and the martyr Polycarp, kept to 14 Nisan, whatever day of the week it was, whether Sunday or not. Polycrates of Ephesus, who cites these authorities, speaks of “keeping the day when the people put away the leaven” and having the Holy Spirit, the range of Scripture and the need to obey God and not man as justification for sticking to 14 Nisan. Meanwhile, Victor of Rome denounced and excommunicated those in Asia who kept these customs. Irenaeus held that the disputes should not divide believers but that the resurrection itself should be celebrated on the Lord’s day.

From the 8th century, Easter has been held on the first Sunday after the post Spring equinox full moon. Usually the difference amounts to days, although in 1997 it amounted to a full month (at the next full moon, March 28-30, Easter, April 22, Pesach/Passover).

Believe it or not, ‘Easter’ actually can be found in the King James Bible but not the New King James:

And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people. (Acts 12.4)

The word in the Greek translated as Easter is *pascha*, which is only here translated as ‘easter.’ Everywhere else, *Pascha* is always translated as Passover (28/29 times).

Easter’s name is said to derive (according to the 8th century English church historian, Bede) from the pagan goddess of spring, Eostre. The Anglo-Saxons named this month Eastermonath after the Goddess Eostre. Bede said that the name “Easter” was derived from the Teutonic goddess of spring, Eostre, Ostra, Eostur, Eastur, Ostara, Osta. The same root is found in the name for the place where the sun rises (East, Ost). The word Easter, then, originally may have meant the celebration of the spring sun, which had its birth in the East and brought new life upon earth. This symbolism was transferred to the supernatural meaning of our Easter, to the new life of the Risen Christ, the eternal and uncreated Light. It is not certain, however, whether such a goddess ever existed and she may have been merely the name of a season. Nevertheless, pagans are convinced of her authenticity.

Further still, Easter could be nothing more than Astarte, one of the titles of Beltis, the queen of heaven, whose name, as pronounced by the people of Nineveh, was evidently identical with that now in common use in this country. On the Assyrian monuments that same name is Ishtar.²¹

The cross, which in Christianity is a symbol of the crucifixion and Easter, was also a pagan symbol of the four seasons—hence hot cross buns, marked to represent the four

²¹ Rev. Alexander Hislop, *The Two Babylons*,

seasons. In fact, hot cross buns were offered to Diana, the Roman moon goddess. The buns were moon shaped and divided into the four quarters of the moon.

In the 2nd and 3rd century church it became the practice for people to be christened and baptized only at Easter, as this was the symbolic time of year associated with new life (and also new birth). New Life became the justification for the introduction of egg imagery into medieval Easters.

The moves away from a more Jewish Passover/Easter began in the 2nd century and earlier. Tertullian wrote towards the end of the 2nd century that it was not fitting to feast on the day on which the bridegroom was taken away. This meant the Jewish Sabbath: Friday evening to Saturday, yet this would have been an astonishment to Jewish believers for whom the Sabbath was (and still is biblically) an eternal feast upon which you may never fast. Hence, churches are stripped bare and the Eucharist is not taken on Friday or Saturday (the Easter Lord's supper took place on Thursday evening). Other anti-Jewish sentiment was expressed in the Good Friday intercessory collect in the Book of Common Prayer, "mercy for all Jews, Turks, Infidels and Hereticks," this has now been more suitably expressed. It is also noteworthy how absent the "lamb" is from modern western Easter celebrations. In Europe, in countries like Poland and Italy the lamb is still a part of the feast, but elsewhere it is all but forgotten.