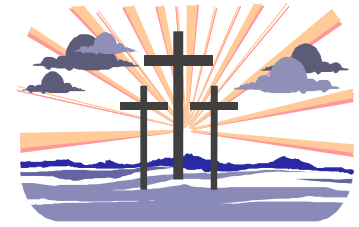




Passover & Easter by Fr. Luke Tran



Passover is a major Jewish feast that is most familiar to Christians. It was a national agricultural festival and is a very popular family oriented religious festival that is celebrated every spring for a period of seven days (in Israel: eight in Diaspora) on the anniversary of the Exodus from Egypt.

Easter is the feast of the Resurrection of Christ which is the most important Christian celebration. It is also called Pascha (Greek, 'Passover').

Saldarini in his book *Jesus and Passover* comments: "The Easter services refer to Passover often because the Jewish Passover and the Christian celebration of Jesus' death and resurrection grow from the same faith, the same ritual and the same theological tradition. Jesus saved us as God saved Israel."¹

In this research, I will examine the similarities between Passover and Easter and the idea of sacrifice and salvation found in celebrated holy feasts.

1. Origins of Passover.

The English term Passover derives from the Hebrew *pesah*, Exod. 12:13, "I will pass over you ... when I strike the land of Egypt," while the Greek word *pascha* is the basis for the English *Pasch* and *paschal*. "Exodus chapters 12 and 13 explain that the feast developed from three separate practices: the Passover Sacrifice, the feast of Unleavened Bread, and the consecration of first-born which were originally pre-Israelite and unrelated to the escape from Egypt."² The animals were skinned and butchered, so that certain parts could be offered and the rest of the meat prepared (roasted) for the evening meal.

According to Saldarini, "Passover began as a spring festival among semi-nomadic shepherds long before the Hebrew people existed and it endures as a religious celebration of the Hebrews' deliverance from slavery in Egypt within the family and in the synagogue today."³ Before the Hebrews are set to be free from Egypt, God wants to punish the Egyptians in killing their first-born children and animals.

¹ Saldarini, Anthony J., *JESUS and PASSOVER*, page 1.

² Saldarini, page 5-6.

³ Saldarini, page 3.

God gives the Hebrews specific instructions how to avoid the death of their own first-born children along with the Egyptians. They have to kill a lamb or a goat and put the blood on their door so that God will pass over them without harm. Moses records God's instructions and gives directions for future Passover celebrations.

From hints in the Old Testament and histories of religions, Saldarini pieced together an account of the origin of Passover. The Passover sacrifice to gods to ensure safe passage of the flocks from valley to mountain pastures was adopted by the Hebrews to commemorate their travel to safety in Israel. The original feast of Unleavened Bread (a week in which people ate only unleavened bread to mark the beginning of the harvest season and to recognize human dependence on God for fertility of the earth) symbolized the beginning of new life. The biblical story attributes the lack of leaven to the haste with which the Hebrews left Egypt.

The gift (consecration) of the first fruits or first-born child to God recognizes God as the giver and protector of life. The blood of the sacrifice of first-born animals is linked to the blood of the Passover sacrifice. Given the need for protection of life symbolized by these spring practices, they were easily linked to the concrete historical experience of Israel. God's life-giving action in spring and God's life-saving action in Egypt merge smoothly in the Jewish feast of Passover/Unleavened Bread.⁴ With the dominance of the Temple it became a solemn sacrifice in Jerusalem. Later, in the reorganization of Temple worship which followed the destruction of the Temple and its rebuilding, Passover became the first and most important day of the week-long feast of Unleavened Bread and eventually its name was used for both feasts."⁵

2. Passover during Jesus' time.

By the first century B.C., the Passover sacrifice and meal took place only in Jerusalem because the animal (a lamb or a goat) had to be killed in the Temple. The book of Deuteronomy describes that the Jewish feast had to take place in Jerusalem, the sacred religious and political center of Judaism. Passover was a pilgrimage festival; crowds of people came from all over Palestine to celebrate this most important feast. At three o'clock, priests began the sacrificing of unblemished 1-year-old animals brought by the heads of each household to the

⁴ Saldarini, page 7-8.

⁵ Saldarini, page 15.

Temple area. Levites and the pilgrims sang hymns and psalms of praise and thanks. In the late afternoon, families ate the Passover meal.

The New Testament records that Jesus too went to Jerusalem many times with his parents and later with His disciples. The Synoptic Gospels describe the disciples' search for a room where they could eat the Passover meal. Jesus tells them to follow a certain man to his house and ask to use the upper room which was furnished with a table and couches. Usually the crowds were so great that during Passover that the sacrificial meal could be eaten anywhere in Jerusalem, rather than just in the Temple. The Mishna directs that the group eating the meal be large enough to consume the whole animal, so ten to twenty people would gather in rented rooms or tents to cook and eat. The meal was eaten after dark because the Jewish day begins with sundown. Passover begins in the evening. The group ate the food prescribed in the Bible – part of the sacrificed animal, usually lamb, unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Wine was consumed since it was the ordinary table drink at that time. The four cups of wine that are central to the later Seder derive from this earlier use of wine. Records of Passover customs are meager and some customs have changed. The Book of Exodus says Passover should be eaten with sandals and belt on, with staff in hand and quickly (a recreation of the last meal before the escape from Egypt). Over the centuries the mood has changed and relaxed so now it is a leisurely family celebration. (See Appendix I for the Modern Seder).

3. The Passover Seder.

The word Seder means “order” in Hebrew. It means the order of the ceremonial service (prayers and events) of the first night of Passover. It is not certain what order of events was followed in the Passover meal during the first century. The more complete instructions found in “the tract of the Mishna entitled Pesachim dates from the late second century AD, so some changes may have been introduced since the time of Christ.”⁶ Probably there were appetizers such as a vegetable or lettuce dipped in vinegar or some sauce followed by a cup of wine. A blessing over bread initiated the main meal. After the meal, another cup of wine followed. These blessings were the occasions for Jesus' declaration. After the meal, the meaning and story of the first Passover were related. The redemption from Egypt was celebrated by singing the Hallel (“Praise”), a sequence of psalms praising God as the Savior. The last cup of wine was consumed afterwards. For Jews, the

⁶ Sloyan, Gerard s, The Paschal Feast in the Bible, page 95.

Passover meal reinforced their identity as the people descended from Abraham, saved by God in Egypt, led by Moses, and given a land and way of life. It included sacrifice, blood, bread, and the notion of death. “In all of the prayers and rituals of Passover God plays the central role. God saved the people of Israel in the past, cares for them now and will finally redeem them in the end.”⁷ Jesus celebrated the Passover and used these elements to initiate a new rite – the Eucharist and later became the Paschal Lamb.

Passover is a festival which abounds in ritual that is mentioned in the Torah. This ritual was amplified later by the rabbis, and then expanded by local customs. The Mishna, a compilation of Jewish laws and regulations date back to 200 AD long after Jesus’ time. The Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 AD meant that no sacrifice could be offered in Jerusalem. The Mishna assumes that Passover can be celebrated without the Passover sacrifice which formed the center of the meal – a major change in Jewish tradition. Since Rabbinic Judaism has placed study of Scripture and law at the center of its way of life and worship (Midrashic interpretations of Scripture are added at certain points) the core of the ceremony becomes the interpretation of Deuteronomy 26 on how God saved Israel. “So important is this biblical exegesis that the Passover Seder is often called Passover Haggada. A haggada is an interpretation of a non-legal section of Scripture.”⁸

According to Saldarini, the Passover Seder gives several similar elements to Christian worship. “Salvation and redemption are central interests and bread is a major symbol. Scripture is read, remembered and relived in the participation of the community. Prayer and ritual action point to God’s mercy in the past and to the hope of his care in the future.”⁹

The Passover Seder combines and integrates many aspects of Jewish belief and practice. The words and actions represent what happened in the first Passover and what the Jews have done every year since. The unleavened bread and bitter herbs symbolize Israel’s danger and suffering in Egypt as well as its hope for salvation.

4. Passover in the Gospels.

The core of Christian belief that Jesus’ death paid for humanity’s sins and that His resurrection has given us a new life grown out of Jewish belief. The early Christian believers linked the final hours of Jesus’ life with the Passover

⁷ Saldarini, page 50.

⁸ Saldarini, page 42.

⁹ Saldarini, page 43.

celebration and used its symbolism and allusions to understand Jesus' actions. In daily worship they read the Old Testament which foretold the coming of a Savior, Jesus.

There are different stories and teachings about Jesus in the four Gospels. In the Synoptic Gospels we find references to the Passover in the story of Jesus' death and events surrounding it.

Jesus and his parents used to go to Jerusalem to celebrate the feasts of Passover and other festivals. When He was twelve years old, He stayed behind when they left for Nazareth. They later found Him in the Temple sitting among the teachers and discussing things very intelligently (Luke 2:41-50). He defends His disappearance to Mary and Joseph by reminding them that He must be about His Father's business.

At the beginning of His ministry (just after the wedding at Cana), Jesus again went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. In the Temple compound He found people selling sacrificial animals and changing money. He drives them out saying that His father's house is not a place for commerce. However commerce was acceptable in the precincts around the Temple and even necessary for people who wish to offer sacrifices¹⁰ (Mark 11:11, 15-17; Matthew 21:12-13; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:13-22).

In chapter six in John's Gospel, we find Jesus traveling around the Sea of Galilee just before Passover; He multiplied the loaves and fishes for the crowd that comes to hear Him. He performs a second miracle when he walked on the water to rejoin the disciples.

According to the three Synoptic Gospels, Jesus ate with the disciples (last Passover) on Passover Eve, was tried during Passover Eve and crucified on the first day of Passover. This last thing being the real difficulty which has led scholars to question the chronology of the Synoptics and Mark in particular and to query whether it was the Passover Seder Jesus kept with His disciples or just made a Qiddush (a blessing of bread and wine on the Sabbath).¹¹

The sacred writers agree that the final events of Jesus' life took place in a 24-hour period from the last Supper to the crucifixion the day before the Sabbath. Jesus

¹⁰ Saldarini, page 73.

¹¹ Bowman, John, The Gospel of Mark, page 258-259.

sends two disciples to find a specific man in Jerusalem in whose house they will celebrate the Passover. The man has a private room upstairs and it is prepared for the meal. Certainly the city was crowded and there was no room at the Temple to eat. The Gospel accounts say nothing about the details of the meal; roast lamb is not even mentioned. We do not see the group going to sacrifice an animal. No one reads or tells the Exodus story or asks questions. Sloyan in his book *The Paschal Feast in the Bible* comments: “the evangelists are silent on the subject of the paschal lamb, probably because it had no place in Christian ritual.”¹² Certainly the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple changed the Passover practice. Secondly, Jesus Himself had replaced the sacrificial lamb as the Lamb of God and was the center of the Easter Triduum.

What we read of the Passover Seder is very little. There is bread and wine on the table and couches on which they can recline. There is also a dish for dipping (bread) John 13:26; Matthew 26:24. Mark 14:22 and Matthew 26:25 and Luke 22:19 records Jesus blessing bread (thanks God, in Luke) broke it into pieces and said, “...this is my body”. Luke adds, “...which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the Seder, there is *Mozi Mazzah*, the blessing of the divided unleavened bread which is eaten by the participants.

Jesus took a cup of wine (fruit of the vine), gave thanks, and gave it to the disciples saying, “...this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many.” Matthew added “...for the forgiveness of sin” (Mt 26:28). While Luke said, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). This cup corresponds to the *Barekh* – grace after meals said over the third cup of wine.

Only Mark mentioned the singing of psalms probably *Hallel* at the end of meal and before the group left for the Mount of Olives (Mark 14:26). Since Jesus said that He would drink no more wine until He drank it with the disciples in the New Kingdom, He did not drink the fourth cup after *Hallel*.

5. Easter in early Christianity.

Easter Vigil arises from biblical regulations for Passover. Hebrews waited through the night when God killed all the first-born Egyptians. Finally Pharaoh agreed to free them. Israel keeps watch, a vigil, in honor of God and of that night.

¹² Sloyan, Gerard S., *The Paschal Feast in the Bible*, page 97.

Holy Week was not celebrated in the first century and the early second century. An independent Easter celebration began in the second century. The baptism of new converts at Saturday night vigil began in the third century. Water symbolizes the saving power of God - bringing the Hebrews through the Red Sea to freedom and to be a holy people and later water flowing from Jesus' side to save all from sin. The water of baptism cleanses and renews and saves. Good Friday celebration began in the fourth century.

The early Christians who lived in Jerusalem until 70 AD celebrated the Passover and subsequent evening meal in the ordinary way. Though we have no direct evidence, Saldarini suggests that it is likely that the Christians added some commemoration of Jesus' death and resurrection and recalled the last meal as Passover.

Twenty years after Jesus' death, many Gentiles became Christians. These non-Jews did not keep the Jewish law or observe feast days. However they were aware of Passover and its significance. Paul's epistle to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 5:6-8) refers to the custom of using new unleavened bread (feast of Unleavened Bread) and Jesus as the Passover sacrifice.

Jewish Christians, Ebionites and Nazaraioi, of the second century were treated as heretics by Church leaders. They preserved a very Jewish way of life and observed Mosaic law, so they rejected Paul's teachings. They observed the Sabbath, faced Jerusalem when they prayed, used unleavened bread and water to celebrate the Eucharist. They accepted Jesus to be the Messiah and prophet, but not God. These groups continued to exist into the fourth century, especially in Syria.

In Syria and Asia Minor during the first and second centuries, many Christians celebrated the Christian Passover at the same time as Jewish Passover, beginning on the fourteenth of Nisan. The Quartodecimans (Latin: "Fourteeners") did not eat the Jewish Passover but rather fasted in memory of Jesus' death. They read the story of Passover in Exodus 12. At dawn of the fifteenth, they broke their fasts with the Lord's Supper. This is the earliest account we have for Christian celebration of Jesus' resurrection.

At the end of second century Pope Victor I, trying to impose a Sunday service, tried to suppress the Quartodecimans practice of celebrating Jesus' passion and resurrection during Jewish Passover. Despite the support of other prominent Christian writers, the Eastern practice of a Christian Passover gradually died out in

the next two to three centuries as the Western custom of Sunday observance prevailed.

By the second century, Easter Sunday was known in Rome and elsewhere. By the third and fourth century an Easter vigil was celebrated in both the Eastern and Western Catholic Church.

Jewish and Christian Passover greatly influenced the Sunday Easter celebrations, first by observing a vigil and fasting. Readings and prayers were other added elements. The lighting of a single candle to break the darkness symbolized that Jesus, the Light of the World, conquered evil and darkness. The readings of Exodus used in Christian Passover were added. The vigil service today contains seven readings from readings from the Old Testament, including Exodus and the prophecy by Ezekiel that God will save His people from exile and purify them from sin and disobedience - fulfilled through Jesus.¹³

In the third century, the Easter season was extended to Pentecost (the Jewish feast of Shavu'ot or Weeks – the Gift of the First fruits – fifty days after Passover). Both Passover and Shavu'ot (Greek, pentekoste = fiftieth) acknowledge God as the Giver of the land and Lord of history as expressed in Deuteronomy 26:1-11.

The early Christians adopted this 50-day festival and gave it an entirely new character by celebrating the Lord's death, resurrection and sending of the Holy Spirit, and founding of the Church. As the Hebrews were guided by a pillar of fire, the Christians were inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit.¹⁴

Conclusion.

The liturgy of Easter celebration is rooted in the liturgy of Passover. The theology of both feasts celebration is similar: God led and saved Israel as Jesus saved us. Passover marks the establishment of the Jews as a united people, a chosen people going to the Promised Land. Easter Triduum marks the beginning of Christianity where God's promises salvation is achieved through Jesus' death which saves us from our sins to allow us to enter the Kingdom of God.

¹³ Saldarini, page 111-112.

¹⁴ Ellebracht, Mary Pierre, The Easter Passage, page 202-203.

Appendix I for Modern Seder

Today's Modern Passover Seders follow these steps:

KADDESH:

A benediction over a goblet of wine, sanctifying the day.

REHAZ:

Wash the hands without reciting a benediction.

KARPAS:

Dip a vegetable, such as potato, radish, celery or parsley, into some salt water, and eat it.

YHAZ:

Break the middle mazzah/matzah, unleavened bread, and hide half of it for the afikoman (a piece of mazzah/matzah put aside at the beginning of the seder, and eaten at the end of the meal).

MAGGID:

Tell the story, and sing praises to the Lord over the second cup of wine, which will be drunk at the end of this part.

RAHZAH:

Wash the hands before the meal, with a benediction.

MOZI MAZZAH:

Recite the usual benediction for bread, and the additional benediction for mazzah/matzah; eat a piece of the upper mazzah and of the remaining part of the middle mazzah/matzah.

MAROR:

Eat bitter herbs dipped in haroset (paste made of wine, nuts and other ingredients, used at the seder).

KOREKH:

Eat a sandwich of the bottom mazzah and bitter herbs dipped in haroset.

SHULHAN OREKH:

The festive meal.

ZAFUN:

Eat the hidden piece of the middle mazzah, afikoman.

BAREKH:

Grace after meals over the third cup of wine.

HALLEL:

Sing further songs of praise, after which the fourth cup of wine is drunk.

NIRZAH:

'Acceptance' – God has found the actions performed acceptable, and appropriate hymns are recited.¹⁵

¹⁵ Klein, Mordell. PASSOVER, page 51.