

Jesus and the Passover Seder

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We may imagine that Jesus celebrated the Seder throughout his life: as a child and adolescent accompanying his parents, as a young man, and during his public ministry as a mature adult. Except for the last few years of his life, we have no explicit evidence regarding this matter, or about other aspects of his religious life, but celebrating the Seder was what every Jew did. Jesus' Last Supper may or may not have been a Seder; the evidence is not conclusive. Certainly it took place very close to Passover and was imbued with the spirit of this festival; the gospel writers certainly interpreted Jesus' last days in relation to Passover.

Here we ask what the Seder and its celebration might have meant for Jesus, and in what ways it might have influenced his life. Several qualifications need to be named immediately. First, the celebration of Passover in Jesus' time was not exactly the same as it is today. Passover was a pilgrimage festival in which people went up to Jerusalem, where the paschal lamb was killed in the Temple. In addition, scholars debate the shape and content of the Seder in Jesus' day; it has grown and developed over the centuries, and exactly what it looked like in the first century CE is not certain. What follows nevertheless takes today's Seder as its starting place, as its basic shape cannot be *too* different than its earlier expression.. A second qualification is that it is difficult if not impossible clearly to separate the

Seder and its possible influences from the influences of many other aspects of Jewish life. What follows, then, is more a spiritual reflection than a study in history.

As a liturgical memorial of the exodus, the Seder was central to Jesus' religious life and his religious identity. In celebrating the Seder, Jesus affirmed and embraced the exodus as foundational and formative for the Jewish people; he expressed his fidelity to God's command (Exodus 12.1-20) to celebrate one of the most important festivals; he recommitted himself to membership in the Jewish people - for *not* to celebrate the Seder was to cut oneself off from the people. In celebrating Passover, Jesus renewed - communally - the covenant between God and Israel that was established in the course of the exodus.

In their accounts of Jesus' life and ministry, the gospels tell us of many meals, for they were occasions on which he taught, healed, and shared food with others. In this Jesus was influenced by the Seder meal as well as by the Sabbath supper and ordinary meals as well - for every meal is a religious act in Judaism. In the Seder, Jesus experienced festivity and joy and joined in singing the psalms. At this special meal he experienced community, bonding, hospitality and mutuality among those who shared the fruits of God's creation and who celebrated the deliverance of the exodus. He knew community with family, friends, companions, disciples, those who questioned or were indifferent to his message, and even those who disapproved of his words and actions. He also learned to reach out to, care for and include the poor, the outcasts, those on the margins, and those excluded from society.

In the Seder, the meal itself is preceded and followed by storytelling: the great event and experience of the exodus is proclaimed at length. The story is told in several different ways: in the form of questions, in biblical commentary, in song and in symbol, so that all who are present might grasp its meaning as deeply as they are able. The story is told especially so that children might learn and appreciate their heritage. Storytelling was a major element of Jesus' ministry. He told stories to include children and challenge adults, to comfort and confront, to explicate and raise questions, to illuminate and sometimes, to obscure. He preached good news - and that is what the Passover story is as well.

At the centre of the Seder are the meal prayers: the simple blessing over bread and unleavened bread at the beginning, and the lengthy and more elaborate prayer over wine afterward. These and related prayers formed Jesus in the habit of prayer and in his approach to praying. In blessing God, Jesus acknowledged the goodness of God and gave thanks, and as well acknowledged the gift not only of food but also of life that come from God. In these prayers he - and the entire community gathered at table - told the story of God's goodness in creation and throughout Israel's history, and looked forward to the perfect fulfilment of God's plan.

The Seder communicates not only through words, but also and especially through its central symbolic foods: lamb, unleavened bread, and wine. Especially in the story of his Last Supper, we hear how Jesus took the bread and then the wine, said the blessing, broke the bread and gave bread and wine to that community. In the course of the celebration the symbolic foods are interpreted in varied and rich ways. Not just food and drink for the body, they communicate the story of the exodus in ways the body can touch and taste and smell. Jesus appreciated the values of wine and bread and lamb; they

are spoken of in the gospels. Especially in the story of his Last Supper, we hear his interpretations and how he relates these to his own self and mission.

The Seder celebrates the exodus not just as an event in the past, but also an experience of all those present; it also looks forward to a perfect and final exodus in the future, when God's plan is perfectly fulfilled. The exodus is central to the entire biblical story, not just the earliest phase of the life of Israel; almost every act of God's mercy and deliverance was interpreted in terms of the exodus. In his ministry, Jesus acted to celebrate and bring to actual experience the exodus events of deliverance. He extended exodus deliverance to those in slavery to leprosy, blindness, paralysis, hemorrhage, other sicknesses, possession, and ignorance. He lived in fidelity to the covenant and looked forward to its final completion.

For Christians today, Easter especially but also Sunday, express values similar to those expressed above. Easter is the central feast whose celebration is part of being a member of Christ's community; in observing it Christians are being faithful to Jesus' command to keep his memorial feast. It is a ritual meal, celebrated with festivity, joy and song; it is an occasion when the community as a whole becomes visible. The Easter Vigil especially is a time for extended telling of the great story, from creation until the first Easter, and this story is for all. Today we appreciate that the great prayer of thanksgiving at the center of the eucharist has Jewish roots, though its early history is much debated by scholars. We thank God for creation and for many gifts, including that of Jesus. At Easter and every eucharist we celebrate with bread and wine, and employ the Jewish actions of taking, blessing, breaking and sharing. We interpret these symbolic foods in relation to Jesus but remember also their Passover roots.