

The Messiah In The Passover



The number four plays a significant role in Judaism. There are the four species of vegetables for Sukkot; four kingdoms in the book of Daniel; four Torah portions in the *tefillin*;^{*} four Matriarchs. At Passover, we find this number in abundance. In the course of the Seder we have four sons, four cups of wine, four expressions of redemption (Exodus 6:6-7) and perhaps the most famous "four" of all--the Four Questions.

As the Seder developed over the centuries, the Four Questions underwent many changes and were altered as different situations arose.¹ For example, originally one question dealt with why we ate roasted meat.² After the destruction of the Temple, that question was deleted and one about reclining was substituted. Today, the Four Questions (phrased as observations) are asked by the youngest child in the family:

Why is this night different from all other nights?

On all other nights, we may eat either chometz or matzoh; on this night, only matzoh.

On all other nights, we eat all kinds of vegetables; on this night, we must eat maror.

On all other nights, we do not dip even once; on this night we dip twice.

On all other nights, we may eat either sitting or reclining; on this night, we all recline.

The father then explains the Passover story.

There are other questions that the rabbis could have chosen as well. In the spirit of rabbinical adaptation, here are some additional questions that both children and adults might ponder.

(* This and all other italicized Hebrew terms will be listed in a glossary at the end of this article.)

Why do we place three matzot together in one napkin?

There are any number of traditions about this. One tradition holds that they represent the three classes of people in ancient Israel: the Priests, the Levites, and the Israelites. Another tradition teaches that they symbolize the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Yet another explanation is that it is a depiction of the "Three Crowns": the crown of learning, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of kingship.³ And a fourth option is that two of the *matzot* stand for the two weekly loaves of Exodus 16:22, and the third matzoh represents the special Passover bread called the "bread of affliction."⁴ And if those are not enough to keep one's imagination running, here's another. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Sperling suggested that the three matzot stand for the three "measures of the fine meal" which Sarah prepared for Abraham's angelic guests (Genesis 18). The reason for this interpretation lies in the rabbinic tradition that this event occurred on the night of Passover!⁵ Out of all these explanations, how can we decide which is the right one, or is there yet another?

Why is the middle matzoh, the afikoman, broken in the course of the Seder?

Are we breaking the Levites, or Isaac, or the crown of learning, or one of the guests' cakes, or the bread of affliction? Or are we symbolizing the parting of the Red Sea (another explanation)?⁶ If any of these

explanations are correct, why is the *matzoh* hidden away, buried under a cushion, and then taken out and eaten by all, as the Sephardic ritual puts it, "in memory of the Passover lamb?"

Where is our pesach, our Passover sacrifice, today?

The Torah prescribes that a lamb is to be sacrificed and eaten every Passover as a memorial of the first Passover lambs which were killed (Deuteronomy 16:1-8). In reply, it is said that without a Temple we can have no sacrifices - yet some have advocated that the sacrifice still be made in Jerusalem even without a Temple.⁷ Since the Passover sacrifice, like others, involved the forgiveness of sins, it is important that we do the right thing. Some feel that the *pesach* had nothing to do with forgiveness. But in Exodus Rabbah 15:12 we read, "I will have pity on you, through the blood of the Passover and the blood of circumcision, and I will forgive you." Again, Numbers Rabbah 13:20 cites Numbers 7:46, which deals with the sin offering, and then adds, "This was in allusion to the Paschal sacrifice." Clearly the rabbis of this time period regarded the *pesach* as effecting atonement, and Leviticus 17:11 confirms that "it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul."⁸ Today, however, we have only a shankbone, the *zeroah*, as a reminder of the Passover sacrifice, and roasted egg, the *chaggigah*, in memory of the festival offerings. But nowhere did God say that we could dispense with sacrifice. So, where is our *pesach* today?

The answers to these questions can be found by examining how and why the Seder observance changed dramatically in the first century.

The Seder celebrated by Jesus and his disciples

The "Last Supper" was a Passover meal and seems to have followed much the same order as we find in the Mishnah. In the New Testament accounts, we find reference to the First Cup, also known as the Cup of Blessing (Luke 22:17); to the breaking of the matzoh (Luke 22:19); to the Third Cup, the Cup of Redemption (Luke 22:20); to reclining (Luke 22:14); to the *charoseth* or the *maror* (Matthew 26:23), and to the Hallel (Matthew 26:30).

In particular, the matzoh and the Third Cup are given special significance by Jesus:

And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:19-20).

The Passover Lamb

The early Jewish believers in Jesus considered him the fulfillment of the Passover lambs that were yearly sacrificed. Thus Paul, a Jewish Christian who had studied under Rabbi Gamaliel, wrote, "*Messiah, our pesach, has been sacrificed for us*" (1 Corinthians 5:7). John in his gospel noted that Jesus died at the same time that the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the Temple (see John 19:14) and that like the Passover lambs, none of his bones were broken (the others being crucified had their leg bones broken by the Romans - John 19:32, 33, 36). The idea behind all this was that just as the Israelites were redeemed from Egyptian slavery by an unblemished lamb, now men could be freed from slavery to sin by the Messiah, the Lamb of God.

The cessation of the Temple sacrifices

The first Christians were considered a

part of the Jewish community until the end of the first century when they were expelled by the synagogue. Until the temple was destroyed, these Messianic Jews worshipped regularly with those Jews who didn't believe in the Messiah. In fact, there were entire congregations that worshipped Y'shua and they continued in their observance of the regular Jewish festivals. In such a setting, much interchange of ideas was possible. Jesus declared over the matzoh, "This is my body." Since the Jewish believers of that time saw Jesus as the Passover lamb, it followed that they would see the matzoh as symbolic of Jesus, the Passover lamb. In turn, with the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of sacrifices, the larger Jewish community might well have adopted the idea that the matzoh commemorated the lamb, even if they discounted the messianic symbolism.

The Afikoman Ceremony

As mentioned earlier, the significance of the middle matzoh and the ceremony connected with it is shrouded in mystery. The derivation of the word afikoman itself sheds some light. The word is usually traced to the Greek epikomion ("dessert") or epikomioi ("revelry").⁹ But Dr. David Daube, professor of civil law at Oxford University, derives it from aphikomenos, "the one who has arrived."¹⁰ This mystery clears further when one considers the striking parallels between what is done to the middle matzoh (afikoman) and what happened to Jesus. The afikoman is broken, wrapped in linen cloth, hidden and later brought back. Similarly, after his death, Jesus was wrapped in linen, buried, and resurrected three days later. Is it possible that the current Ashkenazic practice of having children steal the afikoman is a rabbinical refutation of the resurrection, implying that grave-snatchers

emptied the tomb?

These factors strongly suggest that the afikoman ceremony was adopted from the Jewish Christians by the larger Jewish community which also adopted the use of the three matzot. Jewish Christians contend that these three matzot represent the triune nature of God, and that the afikoman which is broken, buried and brought back dramatically represents Jesus the Messiah.

The question then remains: What will it take to convince you?

FOOTNOTES

1. Daube, David, The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism (University of London, 1956), p. 187.
2. Klein, Mordell, ed., Passover (Leon Amiel, 1973), p. 69.
3. Rosen, Ceil and Moisha, Christ in the Passover (Moody Press, 1978), p. 70.
4. Klein, p. 53.
5. Sperling, Rabbi Abraham Isaac, Reasons for Jewish Customs & Traditions, (Bloch Publishing Co., 1968), p.m 189.
6. Ibid.
7. Klein, p. 28.
8. Morris, Leon, The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross (Eerdmans, Third ed., 1965), pp. 137-732.
9. Gaster, Theodor Herzl, Passover: Its History and Traditions (Abelard-Schuman, 1958), p. 64.
10. Daube, "He That Cometh" (London Diocesan Council for Christian-Jewish Jewish Understanding, no date).

GLOSSARY OF HEBREW TERMS

chaggigah-roasted egg representing the festival offering; also symbolic of mourning for destruction of the Temple.

charoseth-mixture of apples, cinnamon, nuts and wine representing the mortar of

Egypt.

chometz-any fermented product of grain, all leavening agents; hence, that which makes "sour."

maror-bitter herbs, usually ground horseradish.

matzoh-literally "without leaven"; a flat wafer of unleavened bread (plural matzot).

pesach-the holiday of Passover; the Paschal lamb.

tefillin-phylacteries consisting of inscriptions on parchment encased in two small leather cubicles attached to the arm and head when at prayer.

zeroah-literally "arm"; the roasted shank bone on the seder plate representative of the Paschal sacrifice.

References & Quoted Material

- a Passover article written by Rich Robinson, Jews for Jesus, ISSUES vol. 3:2
- b. The Messianic Passover Haggadah, Lederer Foundation, 1989

For more information write or call:



MENORAH מְנוֹרָה

-MENORAH MINISTRIES-

Proclaiming Messiah

P. O. Box 460024

Glendale, CO 80246-0024 USA

Phone 303-355-2009

E-mail:menorah@menorah.org

Internet Resource Page: www.menorah.org

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PASSOVER



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It was no coincidence that Jesus chose the Passover for the setting of what is now celebrated as communion, the Lord's supper. For the story of the Passover lamb, Jesus the Messiah could best communicate the course he would be taking over the confusing hours that were to follow.