

The Contemporary Protestant Seder: Anachronistic Revisionism?

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Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 410)

In recent years the Seder has been enthusiastically embraced by evangelical Protestants, who celebrate the ritual for what are clearly religious, as opposed to cultural or political, reasons. However, contemporary reconstructions of the order of the Passover meal at the time of Christ are all speculative; the Jewish Seder that is known today did not take its present form until around 200 AD. This paper explores the question of why so many American Christians are willing to forgo the celebration of the Eucharist as the fulfillment of the Passover sacrifice in favor of the innovations of a later Judaism. A critique of the practice as informed by the Orthodox Christian tradition is offered.



Introduction

The Jewish Seder has become a routine part of contemporary Easter services in many American churches. Augmented at times with elements drawn from Christianity, it is pervasive enough to occasion little questioning among evangelicals and mainstream Protestants. The Seder is the ritual meal in which Jews remember the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and their deliverance from bondage to freedom. It involves blessing and consuming symbolic food and wine, asking several ritualistic questions (e.g., Why is this night different from

all other nights?) and recounting the enslavement of the Jews, and their subsequent deliverance by God.

In recent years the Seder has been enthusiastically embraced by evangelicals, who celebrate the ritual for what are clearly religious, as opposed to cultural or political, reasons. The 4000-member Immanuel Church in Silver Spring, Maryland sponsors a yearly Seder that reinterprets the traditional symbolism of Passover using Christian themes. The grape juice stands for Christ's blood; the matzo, with its stripes and holes, represents Christ's pierced and whipped body; and the white cloth symbolizes how Jesus' body was prepared for burial. The contemporary evangelical practice of the Seder is clearly an attempt to show how the Passover and the subsequent Seder meal prefigure and prepare for Christ as the Paschal offering. However, evangelicals appear to be unaware of, or disinterested in, how these events are related to the Eucharist as the actualization of Christ's offering of Himself on the cross. After all, the reason that the Christian Church has not historically practiced the Seder is because this Jewish ritual was a foreshadowing of a new Passover, in which Christ is both the offeror and the offered, whose sacrifice is made present through the celebration of Holy Communion. Evangelical practitioners of the Seder who reject this view, and believe that the Lord's Supper is simply a memorial service, face a dilemma. Contemporary reconstructions of the order of the Passover meal at the time of Christ are all speculative; the Jewish Seder that is known today did not take its present form until around the year 200 AD. The question is: Why reject the pattern of the early Church – with its focus on the celebration of the Eucharist as the fulfillment of the Passover sacrifice – in favor of the innovations of a later Judaism?

In this paper, let us consider the content of the contemporary Jewish Seder and explore the political and social uses of the ceremony. Then let us consider various theological perspectives on the Seder before attending to evangelical approaches to religious ritual and Church history. Finally, let us consider a critique of the practice of the Seder by evangelicals as informed by Orthodox Christian tradition.

The Jewish Seder

Jews were to keep the feast of Passover by sacrificing a lamb during the day and then consuming it after the setting of the sun. With the establishment of the Temple in Jerusalem, the event described in Exodus 12:21–28 – whereby the “the destroyer” passed by the homes of the Jews who had marked their doorposts with the blood of a sacrificed lamb – developed into a pilgrimage festival involving travel to Jerusalem in order to make the Passover sacrifice. During the New Testament period, numerous Paschal lambs were offered in the temple court, with the blood of each lamb collected in silver or gold basins and thrown against the base of the altar as the Levites chanted Psalms 113 and 114. The carcasses were then suspended on hooks, with sacrificial portions removed and burned on the altar, and the rest given to worshippers who would return to their homes to roast and eat the lambs as the final phase of the Passover ritual. Over time additional customs were added, to the point where the event became so highly ritualized that it was known as the Seder, which means “order” in Hebrew.¹ Eventually the Seder involved the breaking of unleavened bread, the serving of wine, reclining by the diners, singing of hymns, and the retelling of the Exodus story wherein the importance of the unleavened bread, wine and bitter herbs was explained.²

With the loss of the Temple in AD 70, the Mishnaic rabbis (the rabbis of the first to third centuries who compiled Jewish oral traditions into the first portion of the Talmud) decoupled the Seder from the necessity of the Temple, transforming it into a kinship celebration taking place in individual homes.³ Without an actual sacrifice of the lambs, greater emphasis was placed on the unleavened bread and bitter herbs. The Mishnah,

¹ C.I.K. Story, “The Bearing of Old Testament Terminology on the Johannine Chronology of the Final Passover of Jesus,” *Novum Testamentum* 31 (1989): 316–324.

² Jonathan Klawans, “Was Jesus’ Last Supper a Seder?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (n.d.): <http://www.bib-arch.org/e-features/jesus-last-supper.asp>.

³ Baruch M. Bokser, “Ritualizing the Seder,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56 (1988): 443–471.