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Jon Potest

Ouachita Baptist University

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OUACHITA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

A BRIEF LOOK AT PASSOVER

HONOR'S PROJECT

BY
JON POTEET

MAY 25, 1977

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to briefly examine the tradition of the Passover in light of its origins, historicization and historical development, and its relevance to the Christology expressed in the New Testament gospels. It is necessary to realize from the beginning that in some cases the traditions being dealt with are ancient, and therefore there is scant concrete evidence with which to deal. However, I feel that one can deal with what evidence there is available and realize that his conclusions must be somewhat tentative.

I. ORIGINS AND EARLY HISTORY

When one looks at the traditions of the Passover in the biblical materials it becomes apparent that the feast originally consisted of two elements, these being pesach and mazzoth.¹ For purposes of study I propose to look at the two elements separately and then later look at how they came to be joined together.

The origin of pesach is lost in antiquity. It appears to have originated among the nomadic shepherds who roamed the deserts with their flocks in the ancient Near East. Shauss feels that the early tribes observed a spring festival long before the Exodus from Egypt. Its origins go all the way back to pre-historic days when the people who were later to become the Hebrew nation were still tribes of shepherds wandering in the desert.² He is supported by both Theodor Gaster³ and Robert Pfeiffer.⁴

¹The Jewish Encyclopedia, 1964 ed., s.v. "Passover," by Emil G. Hirsch. See also Johs, Pedersen, Israel: Its Life and Culture, Vol. 3-4 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940; reprint ed., Denmark: Dyva & Jeppesen, 1973), p. 400-401.

²Hayyim Shauss, Guide to Jewish Holy Days: History and Observance (Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1938; New York: Schocken Books, 1962), p. 39.

³Theodor Herzl Gaster, Passover: Its History and Traditions (New York: Henry Schuman, Inc., 1949), p. 17.

⁴Robert H. Pfeiffer, Religion in the Old Testament: The History of Spiritual Triumph (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1961, p. 39.

Gaster in his book on the Passover attempts a reconstruction of the elements of this primitive feast. Its central feature consisted of a common meal eaten by all members of the family at full moon in the first month of spring. This was a standard way of establishing kinship and alliance, the concept being that a common substance and therefore essence was absorbed. This kind of meal is mentioned biblically in Genesis 26:30 when Isaac and Abimelech make a treaty; in Joshua 9:14 when the princes of Israel make an alliance with the Gibeonites; and in Obadiah 7 where it appears that "men of your bread" and "men of your confederacy" are synonymous. So perhaps some of the original purposes were to renew ties of kinship, bring new life into the family, and also renew bonds of mutual aid and protection. It is important to remember that the ancient conception of the family contained not only human members but also divine. The family god or gods were felt to be present and actual partakers of the meal. As the deity was present at the meal, he was included in the obligations imposed upon the participants.⁵

It appears that the elements of the feast have been preserved in the biblical text, particularly Exodus 12:1-13:6. Shauss concludes that in the month when the lambs were born, a festival was observed at full moon. A sheep or goat from the flock was sacrificed. This sacrifice occurred just before nightfall and afterwards the animal was roasted whole. The members of the family ate a hasty meal in the middle of the

⁵Gaster, Ibid., p. 17-19.

night. It was taboo to break any of the bones of the animal or leave any of it uneaten by the time that daybreak came. The blood of the sacrificial animal was daubed on the tent openings and tentposts.⁶ It will be important to attempt to discover the meanings behind these elements.

I have already mentioned Gaster's understanding of the reason for the meal. Ringgren believes that the element of haste in eating the meal and the readiness to travel might be connected with a readiness to depart in order to seek new places of pasturage. During the spring, the shepherds moved their flocks. The feast had the purpose of protecting the herds from injury during this dangerous time of travel.⁷ Hirsch feels that in connection with this, that the sacrificial lamb was a propitiation to the gods in order to gain their protection for the herd.⁸ As the lamb stood for the rest of the flock, it was possibly felt that whatever happened to it during the ceremony would happen to the rest of the flock. Thus the rule forbidding the breaking of any bones came about. Gaster suggests that the blood which was put on the tent was a sign of the ties of kinship. Blood is the essence of kinship and in the Hebrew tradition it was more of a uniting of the families with the total clan. Thus the sign was placed upon the houses. He cites some

⁶Shauss, *Idid.*, p. 39.

⁷Helmer Ringgren, Israelite Religion, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 187.

⁸Jewish Encyclopedia, *Idid.*, "Passover."

modern examples such as the Amor Arabs who smear the blood of a lamb upon the lintel of their patron shiek and the custom among Arabs to sprinkle blood upon captured livestock to incorporate it with the tribal cattle.⁹

However, it must be recognized that the use of blood in the ritual had other significance. Yehezkel Kaufmann in his book on the religion of Israel makes the following statement:

The paschal sacrifice involves several elements that are avowedly apotropaic in nature. A pagan substratum is clearly present, even if paschal offering is made on the night of the full moon of the first month. Originally it seems to have been connected with the sacrifice of animal and human firstborn, perhaps to the moon-god. The ancient conception presumably contained the image of a bloodthirsty demon who ravaged until morning. For protection some of the sacrificial blood was daubed with a hyssop on the lintel and doorposts.¹⁰

Pfeiffer also feels that the smearing of the blood was a protection against demonic influence.¹¹ Gaster also supports this idea. He feels that in addition to the rites of communion the feast was also to avert evil and misfortune. The slaughtered animal becomes a ransom for the family and other livestock. He suggests that the feast received its name from the fact that the procedure ensured that demons would pass over and spare the household from hurt and harm during this time when they were particularly active. In

⁹Gaster, *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁰Yehezkel Kaufmann, The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile (The University of Chicago, 1962; New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p. 115.

¹¹Pfeiffer, *Ibid.*, p. 41.

this connection, the eating of bitter herbs provided a measure of protection against the demonic.¹²

When one turns from the pesach to mazzoth he realizes that he is changing from a pastoral setting to an agricultural one. Kraus feels that the feast of unleavened bread was originally a Canaanite agricultural festival which was adopted by the Israelites as they began to enter the land of Palestine after the events of the Exodus from Egypt.¹³ Ringgren explains the festival thusly:

There is every reason to think that the feast of unleavened bread is rooted in an agricultural civilization and is connected with the beginning of the barley harvest. The loaves of unleavened bread represent the first fruits of the field, and they are eaten in order to release the entire harvest for profane use. None of the old bread from the previous year may be kept; and the new loaves mean a new beginning. Probably we have here a feast that was originally Canaanite and was borrowed by the Israelites.¹⁴

Kraus explains the forbidding of leaven by suggesting that nothing from last year's crop was permitted to be mixed with the crop from this year. He is of the opinion that offerings to the deity, sacrifices, and thanksgiving rites were linked to the ceremony.¹⁵ It does appear upon examination of the elements of the festival that it was originally a part of the Canaanite fertility worship.

¹²Gaster, *Ibid.*, p. 18-21.

¹³Hans-Joachim Kraus, Worship In Israel: A Cultic History of the Old Testament, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1966), p. 97.

¹⁴Ringgren, *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁵Kraus, *Ibid.*, p. 147.

So thus far we have discovered that the Passover festival is the result of the combination of a nomadic shepherd's festival¹⁶ and a Canaanite agricultural feast. It will be important to determine in the next section how the two festivals came to be associated and eventually merged into one, and also how the meaning was changed due to the particular theology of Israel.

One of the unique concepts in the theology of Israel is that Yahweh acts in the realm of history. For indeed Yahweh had revealed himself to the people who were to become Israel in the events of the Exodus experience. This particular emphasis was to make a great change in the Passover as it came to be the celebration of the Exodus event.

Scholars are in general agreement that the oldest verse in the Bible is Exodus 15:21 (the song of Miriam). The oral tradition behind this verse dates back to the original event at the time of the Exodus from Egypt in the

¹⁶It must be mentioned at this point there is another scholarly tradition which rejects the explanation given for origin of the Passover festival. In summary, the view is based on the idea that the name of the festival pesach comes from the verb pasah which is associated with a cultic dance, which celebrated the cultic death of the deity represented by the sacrificial animal. In this light, the elements of the festival are seen as elements which were acted out in a cultic drama. For a further explanation of this view, see Ivan Engnell, A Rigid Scrutiny: Critical Essays on the Old Testament, trans. and ed. John T. Willis with the collaboration of Helmer Ringgren (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969), p. 185-196. It is my opinion that Engnell has let his reconstruction of the New Year's Festival become the basis of evaluation for all the festivals.

13th century B.C.¹⁷ If this is true, then we can definitely say by this point the Israelites had become conscious of the historical nature of their faith. From a literary standpoint the earliest we can say definitely that the Passover was historicized is in the J account of the Passover in Exodus 12:1-13:16.¹⁸ Assuming that the date of the Yahwist (or J) is around the 10th century B.C., it is safe to assume that the historicization took place sometime during this three hundred year span. According to the canons of form criticism it would be safe to say that the tradition connecting the celebration of Passover to the events of Exodus began about one hundred years before it was recorded in the J material.

At this point it would be a good idea to look at the history of literary critical scholarship. According to Childs, the period dominated by the literary critical method was primarily concerned with ascertaining the relationship between the feast of passover and that of unleavened bread. The only general consensus reached was the concept that the passover was preserved in the south and unleavened bread was a northern tradition.¹⁹ At This point there comes an interesting proposition by Kraus. In II Kings 21:21-23, reference is made to the fact that the reform instituted by Josiah had

¹⁷Martin Noth, Exodus: A Commentary, trans. J. S. Bowden Das Zweite Buch Mose, Exodus [Das Alte Testament Deutsch 5] (Gottingen: Vandenhoech & Ruprecht, 1959; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), p. 121-122.

¹⁸I agree with Brevard Childs in tentatively assigning to J: 12:2-23, 27b, 29-34, 37-39. See Brevard S. Childs, The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), p. 184.

¹⁹Ibid.. p. 186.

not been celebrated since the time of the judges. For a long time this reference to a Passover festival being celebrated in the time of the judges was without historical foundation and it was generally held to view it as the claim of a conservative element conscious of tradition. Kraus argues on the basis of Joshua 5:10-12 that there was a feast of Passover and of Unleavened Bread celebrated at Gilgal during the time of the judges.²⁰ If this is true then it would fit in nicely with my early date for the combining and historicizing of the two feasts.²¹

So far I have suggested that the two pre-Israelite nature festivals perhaps began to be historicized at an early date, approximately during the time of the judges. My basic premise is that from an early period in her history Israel was conscious of the historical nature of her faith. Thus the understanding of the nature of God provided the impetus for the historicization of the two festivals which were originally nature oriented. Childs echoes this when he states, "In my judgement it is not likely that the passover material could have been transmitted for a long period within Israel in a non-historicized form."²²

²⁰Kraus, Ibid., p. 51.

²¹It must be realized that Kraus' view is predicated upon the thesis that in the period of the judges that Israel was an amphictyonic confederacy of tribes which were held together by a common religious tradition and a unifying cult. The entire community gathered periodically at central shrines to renew the covenant bonds and celebrate the common tradition. It also depends upon acceptance of an early date for Joshua 5:10-12 which is debatable.

²²Childs, Ibid., p. 187.

It appears that by the time of the Yahwist, the two festivals had been brought together perhaps in a move to cement the ties between the northern and southern tribes during the formation of the monarchy. It can safely be said that at this point the festival is firmly tied to the events of the Exodus. By participating in the festival, the participants actually become a part of the original event. It becomes the great celebration of freedom from bondage. The Passover retains its family setting.

II. EXEGETICAL OVERVIEW OF THE PASSOVER IN EXODUS AND SELECTED PASSAGES

This section has raised some interesting points. The pesach, it appears, originally contained some elements of child sacrifice. This raises a theological issue which must be dealt with in the last section of the paper. The communal meal setting fits in nicely with the later purpose of Israel's celebration, that is, in the Exodus Yahweh becomes the God of Israel and they become his people. The ties of kinship are renewed between Yahweh, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the tribes later to form Israel. Also, the ties are begun and renewed between the various tribes as they share in this common observance. The feast of Unleavened Bread comes from its Canaanite setting with the idea of magic and manipulation of the deity inherent in fertility worship. It is interesting to see how these rituals, one from the ancient past and one from another religion are adapted to fit Israel's own particular religion.

It becomes necessary to look at the total body of Exodus 12:1 to 13:16 to get the understandings of the Passover which are given in the various layers of tradition. The final redaction of this piece of literature probably occurred

during the post-exilic period.²³ Exodus 12:1-20, according to Noth, belongs to the P tradition. The comprehensiveness of these instructions assumes the passover as celebrated in a cultivated land during peaceful times and does not reflect the critical situation of Israel prior to the Exodus. The insertion of the date reflects a definite calendar which was adopted by the Israelites during the Babylonian captivity. The prescription for the choosing of a young, male sheep or goat without blemish as well as the offering of the sacrifice by families is probably from the original rite. The mention of the congregation of Israel would lead one to believe that the passage reflects the post-exilic Israel rather than pre-Exodus. It was the Exodus event and the subsequent covenant at Sinai that began to bring together the tribes and clans into a nation. The phrase "congregation of Israel" reflects a state of unity found after the formation of the nation. It also is a cultic phrase which would be most likely to find its setting in the cultic emphasis of the priestly writer. The concept of the Passover sacrifice occurring before the establishment of the legitimate cult at Sinai shows that the priestly redactor was dealing with an ancient tradition which he felt he could not change. The demand for the burning of any leftovers and the readiness to travel are remnants from the ancient rite.²⁴ The meaning of the passover is described

²³The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, 1962 ed. s.v. "Passover." by J. C. Rylaarsdam.

²⁴Noth, *Ibid.*, p. 126.

by P in verse 13. Here even the reference to the destroyer is included, showing the reverence for the older tradition. The feast of Mazzoth is joined at the end with the demand for eating unleavened bread. Verse 28 closes this section of instructions with the killing of the first born of the Egyptians given as the reason for the passover.

In verses 21-27, the J narrative picks up with Moses instructing the elders as to the details of the Passover in preparation for Yahweh's smiting of the Egyptians. These are primarily concerned with the apotropaic element of smearing blood upon the door and the prohibition against leaving the houses because of the destruction going on outside. In the next section, verses 29-39, the Yahwist explains the connection between Passover and Unleavened Bread by the fact that the Israelites left so hurriedly they did not have time to leaven the bread. J gives the historical explanation for combining the two while P simply orders it without giving reason.

In verses 40-51, the P tradition introduces some elements that imply a much more settled condition. The regulations concerning slaves, natives of the land, sojourners, and strangers presuppose an agricultural setting. The last section (13:3-16) shows the hand of the Deuteronomic editor who makes the feast a pilgrimage festival.²⁵

Childs, in his Exodus commentary, points out some important concepts in this passage as it is found in its final form. He sees the biblical testimony of the relationship

²⁵Noth, *Ibid.*, p. 94-102.

between word and event in the way in which the redactor links commands to the narrative material. The Exodus event has an interpretation both before and after it. As Childs puts it, "the relation between act and interpretation, or word and event is one which cannot be separated."²⁶ He points out that in the tension between verses 1-20 and 21-28 we see the relationship between what is to come and what has already happened. The instructions given for a future celebration of an event which has not happened show that Israel is a people who have been redeemed, but yet await redemption.²⁷

In light of the biblical references in the cultic calendars²⁸ and Chronicles,²⁹ it is possible to give a brief sketch of the historical development of the Passover. It was originally a family festival until the reign of Josiah and the Deuteronomic reform. At that point it was made one of the great pilgrimage festivals which was to be celebrated in Jerusalem. After the destruction of the temple in 586 B.C. the feast was once again a family festival and concentrated primarily on unleavened bread, as the sacrificial system of the temple existed no longer. The domination of the priests after the return from the exile can be seen in the ritualistic prescriptions given in the accounts in Chronicles and the Holiness Code.

²⁶Childs, *Ibid.*, p. 204.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 204-205.

²⁸Exodus 23, Exodus 34, Lev. 23, Num. 28, Deut. 16.

²⁹II Chronicles 30 and 35.

Rylaarsdam offers a reconstruction of the Passover in the time of Jesus. It consisted of two parts, the ritual slaughter of the sheep and goats at the temple with the sacrificial sprinkling of blood against the altar, and the domestic meal with its role of fellowship and historical commemoration. The removal of leaven was done by a burning of leaven by the priests in the temple. The ritual slaughter of the lamb was performed in the afternoon. After many rituals were carried out by the priests the slaughtered animals were returned to the people to be carried home. After the eating of the meal, an appointed son asked the ceremonial question: "Why is this night different from all other nights?" Then the recital began of the historical redemption of Israel from Egyptian bondage. It continued with a telling of all the great events of Jewish history and ended with a prayer for redemption from Roman occupation.³⁰

Thus we have seen how the festival developed into the great festival which commemorated the saving acts of Yahweh in the past and gave hope for the future. The elements were originally pagan and pre-Israelite but they have been reinterpreted to fit the theology of Israel.

³⁰Rylaarsdam, Ibid., "Passover."

III. THE THEOLOGY OF PASSOVER

The Passover tradition as we have seen is rich and varied. Theologically, one of the toughest problems that it poses is the question of the killing of the firstborn. Does God order the slaughter of young children? Concerning this question I must agree with Childs that in the biblical materials there is an abhorrence of the practice of child sacrifice from an early age.³¹ This element probably comes from the pre-Israelite culture where the firstborn of animals were considered special and were dedicated to the deity. It is impossible to say with the evidence that we now have if originally this extended to human firstborn. Whether or not it was practiced at an earlier time, it is clear that it soon was not normative in the faith of Israel. However, the other question remains: Did Yahweh slay the firstborn of the Egyptians? Is God a god who slaughters innocent children? This understanding of God must be evaluated in light of the understanding of God we have in Jesus. Here we are told to love our enemies and God becomes a God of love rather than vengeance. Jesus refuses to return evil for evil even when it means his suffering and death on the cross. In light of this, the slaying of the firstborn cannot be attributed to God.

³¹Childs, *Ibid.*, p. 195.

At its origins, the feast of Unleavened Bread was Canaanite. It was a ritual whereby the participants insured that the gods would continue to make the land fertile and allow it to produce abundant crops. It was viewed as a means of preserving and continuing the cycle of nature which is essential to an agricultural society. However, the Israelites changed it into a ceremony of thanksgiving and tied it into the greatest event in their history. God is not to be manipulated, rather he is to be obeyed. His primary realm of activity is not nature, but history. He is not concerned with preserving cycles, but rather with progress and the moving of history toward a goal.

In light of the development of the traditions and the way in which they are redacted we see some of the priestly theology. The events of history are filled with meaning. It is the job of the believer to first of all be true to the tradition even as the priests preserved those elements which were not consistent with their theology. But most of all the believer is to apply the meaning of the past events to the present situation. Indeed, this is the task of theology: to study the past in order to sensitize people to the action of God in the present.

It must also be said that the Passover points out the redemptive and freeing nature of God. Just as Israel was freed from Egyptian bondage, God is still in the business of freeing people from any sort of bondage. This freeing takes place not only in the political realm but also God works to

free man from anything that would make him less than man. Such things as fear, guilt, hatred, and indifference fall into this category. God frees people in order that they may become all they can be. The small group of slaves in Egypt were freed and became the nation of Israel which was God's special revelation of himself in the world. In the same manner we as human beings are freed to become really human and in so doing we reveal God in our world.

Passover is a celebration of hope. By participating in rituals of Passover, not only was the person reminded of God's act of redemption in the past, but of the promise of the future. Redemption had occurred and yet it is in the process of occurring. We are called to participate in the ongoing process and by so doing, we move closer toward the fulfillment of God's ultimate redemption.

The meaning of the Passover is of particular importance to the Christian as he looks at the life of Christ. The synoptic gospels present the Last Supper as occurring during the Passover meal. The gospel of John presents the concept that Jesus is the paschal lamb. We must examine the implications of this for our Christology. It is important that we realize that the early Christian church saw itself as being within the Jewish tradition as the majority were only recently converted Jews. They saw themselves as the true fulfillment of the Old Testament ideals and thus the New Israel. The hope of Israel is fulfilled in the person of Jesus. The Passover deals with the redemptive nature of God in his dealings with Israel. For the Christian it is Christ

who ultimately reveals God's redemptive nature. Secondly, the Jewish passover reaffirms the sense of community. The partaking of the Lord's Supper binds the Christians into a community who follows the same Lord and shares the same hope. Lastly, the Passover was a time of hope for the Jew. He looks back to the past to God's redemptive acts and experiences them in the present. This gives him hope for the future. The Christian looks to God's ultimate act of redemption in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He experiences the present reality which is the basis of his hope for the future.

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