

Why Christians Can Celebrate Passover, Too

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Recently, Christianity Today published an article entitled, “[Jesus Didn’t Eat a Seder Meal: Why Christians Shouldn’t Either](#)” by Rabbis Yehiel E. Poupko and David Sandmel. The article argues that Christians should refrain from participating in Christian Seders as a matter of historical and ecumenical respect. We disagree on both points.

There is great interest today by Christians to learn more about and participate in Seders to help them better understand the Jewish roots of the Christian faith. In particular, knowing more about the Seder helps Christians explore the Jewish background of the Last Supper celebrated by Jesus, whom we know was a first-century Jewish teacher, and his disciples, who were also Jewish. Both Jesus and his disciples would have grown up observing the Passover in whatever fashion Jewish people living at the time observed the feast.

We agree with the rabbis regarding the importance of caution in the way the sacred traditions of the Jewish faith are handled.

We also agree that Jesus did not celebrate the Passover the way Jewish people commonly observe the festival in the 21st century. However, the Last Supper accounts in the Gospels record a number of themes and practices held in common with the Passover Seder. Perhaps the Last Supper should be viewed as a primitive Seder, which was used by Yeshua as the backdrop for his claim to be the fulfillment of the types and prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures for a greater Lamb, a greater redemption from bondage (to sin), and a new perspective on salvation through his shed blood.

Many Christians and especially Messianic Jews (Jewish believers in Jesus) exercise caution in the way the Messiah is linked to the Passover Seder. In the introduction to a new book entitled *Messiah in the Passover*, which we edited, Christian readers in particular are encouraged to both study and celebrate the Passover as a way to deepen their appreciation for the Jewishness of the Savior. To describe the book’s approach, Glaser writes,

In general, we have taken a very cautious approach and will try and understand the Jewish backgrounds of the New Testament as best we can and not simply presume that the mishnaic tractate Pesahim or today’s Passover Haggadah can simply be read into the Last Supper. Yet, we point out where we do find striking parallels between the religious customs observed by Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper with later Jewish religious developments, and so many of our authors will suggest that these traditions could have been practiced during the Last Supper.

These parallels include the drinking of at least two cups of wine:

And when He [Jesus] had taken a cup and given thanks, He said, “Take this and share it among yourselves; for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes.” . . .

And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood. (Luke 22:17–18, 20)

The breaking of bread, which should be understood as matzah, unleavened bread, as we know this meal took place on Passover. Luke records, “Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which is called the Passover, was approaching” (Luke 22:1). Yeshua says,

And when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” (Luke 22:19)

Bock notes in his chapter,

What makes this meal so different is that Jesus not only refers to the Exodus and ties the meal to Israel’s history, but also completely recasts the meal as a vehicle for describing His coming death as a substitutionary sacrifice. The Lucan reference “for you” points to the substitutionary nature of the sacrifice. In Mark 14:24 Jesus speaks of His shed blood given “for many,” an allusion to Mark 10:45, presenting the idea that Jesus will die as a “ransom for many.” This is in fact a very likely Messianic allusion to Isaiah 53:12, where the Servant bears the sin of the many.

In the Lucan version, the bread is his body and the wine pictures his blood shed for his disciples. Whether Jesus spoke of “the many” as in Mark 14:24 or of the sacrifice being “for you” as in Luke 22:19–20, the point is crystal clear, as Jesus is about to die as an offering made on behalf of others. The allusion to establishing a covenant (Mark 14:24) or a new covenant (Luke 22:20) also assumes a sacrifice and the shedding of blood (Heb. 9:15–22) to inaugurate a covenant.

So in both versions the meal is portrayed as a commentary on Jesus’ forthcoming work, which is the ultimate act of deliverance the Passover anticipated. What started as Israel’s deliverance also had in mind ultimately blessing for the world (Gen. 12:1–3). In places within the meal and service where you would naturally expect to hear about the deliverance of Israel through the first Exodus, we see Jesus pointing his disciples to his substitutionary death for sinners—a second and even greater Exodus deliverance.

Glaser’s chapter refers to Passover traditions embedded in the Gospel of John, which reflect first-century Jewish life and parallel the celebrations of today. First, John sets the time of the events recorded as taking place during the time of the Passover: “Now before the Feast of the Passover...” (John 13:1).

The foot washing that takes place alludes to the various washings in the context of the Passover meal (John 13:3–12). Both the significance of the ritual and the timing as taking place during the meal goes beyond the usual custom of foot washing upon entry to a Jewish home. The dipping of the morsel seems to be more ceremonial than part of a meal and could refer to one of the dippings of the Seder, albeit these were further developed in time to come. We are suggesting that Jesus and his disciples celebrated the Passover the same way any other first-century Jewish family may have done at the time.

It is understood that the Messiah did not celebrate what was created over multiple centuries. Yet oral traditions may have existed at the time that were eventually included in the Passover celebration.

Christians read and believe the history of Israel recorded in the Old Testament, as well as the New Testament. Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Jesus believe the Passover is a paradigm for salvation that finds its fulfillment at the Last Supper when Yeshua gave new meaning to what was observed at that time. Christians who observe the Passover almost always use an adapted version of the Haggadah that takes

this Messianic fulfillment into consideration. This is what Messianic Jews and various church groups and Christian church denominations encourage.

The rabbis might very well misunderstand what transpires during a Christian or Messianic Jewish Passover Seder. As the authors of the article suggest,

... adopting another's ritual shows a lack of respect. Even when pursued with the best of intentions, taking another faith's sacred ritual and transforming it into an expression of one's own tradition displays a misunderstanding of the complex nature of faith traditions.

It can be assumed that the great themes of redemption and salvation had already woven their way into first-century Jewish Passover observance, as nascent as it may have been at the time of Jesus. Jesus affirms this and does not dismiss the importance of the original Passover deliverance commemorated at the Feast. He simply assured the disciples that there was more to come. This was why he used the Passover celebration as a jumping-off point to declare that God's New Covenant with the Jewish people would begin with his sacrificial death.

The rabbis would do well to view Christian observance of the Passover as fulfilled in Jesus as a sign of appreciation and a way of honoring Jewish tradition. In fact, many Christians who take the Lord's Supper in the context of a Messianic Passover Seder find it far more meaningful as it ties two of the most profound statements of Jesus to both Jewish and salvation history.

The first-century Jewish background to Communion drives so many Christians to identify with the Jewishness of their faith. This should be viewed as a step forward in Jewish Christian relations, as for so many years the chasm between Christians and Jews was wide and even antagonistic. Progress has been made, and in many ways there is a greater appreciation and respect among Christians today for the Jewish faith than ever before.

Many have noted the deep roots of Torah, from Exodus 12, in whatever Jesus celebrated that evening with his disciples. The links between the two events existed historically and remain canonized in Scripture. Paul said Jesus is our Passover lamb (1 Cor. 5:7). What Jesus did at this meal was to fulfill an Old Testament type established in the Book of Exodus. Both the original Exodus and the Cross deliver people and show that God keeps his promises. When believers in Jesus observe a Seder, they affirm and celebrate these links and the continuity of the testaments.

The rabbis conclude,

The Seder is uniquely Jewish, born of the Jewish reading of the Torah, shaped by the architecture of our magisterial Perushim-Pharisees and their rabbis, and given artistry and beauty through 2,000 years of Jewish experience. Christians best honor their Jewish neighbors, to whom they wish to express the love of Christ, by recognizing that the Seder meal is the unique spiritual heritage of the Jewish people and respecting it as such.

We believe such statements undo the bridges built over the last 50 years of Jewish-Christian relations. The question of whether or not Jesus celebrated a Passover Seder as we now know it today is to some degree moot. He observed the Passover in the same way as any other first-century Jew. This event can draw Jews and Christians closer to one another rather than driving an additional wedge between our faith communities.

What is concerning to us is when Christians do not see any identification with the Jewish people and the Jewish backgrounds of their faith. But more to the point, we simply cannot rob Christians of their heritage in Jesus—especially not the events of the Last Supper, which was clearly some type of Passover celebration.

We believe respect cuts both ways.