

Was Jesus' Last Supper the Passover Seder?

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Ask virtually anyone: “Was Jesus’ Last Supper a Passover seder?” and the response is likely to be “Of course!”

Yet, Jesus could not have known what a “seder” was, let alone have modeled his Last Supper after one. The elements of even the primitive seder originated *decades after he died*.

The Gospels date Jesus’ ministry to the period of Pontius Pilate, Roman prefect of Judea from 26 C.E. to early 37 C.E. Jesus’ year of death is unknown; scholars settle on between 30 and 33 C.E.

At that time, the core element of Passover observance had been Jerusalem’s sacrificial cult, from 621 B.C.E. (when the biblical mandate first appeared) up until 70 C.E. (the destruction of the Second Temple). Jewish families brought paschal (Passover) lambs for sacrifice on the Temple altar as biblically prescribed: “Thou shalt sacrifice the Passover offering...in the place which the Lord shall...cause His name to dwell [Jerusalem’s Temple]” (Deuteronomy 16:2, 5–6); and the practice of King Josiah: “In the eighteenth year of King Josiah [621 B.C.E.] was this Passover kept...in Jerusalem” (Second Kings 23:21–23). For the ceremony, the *kohanim* (priests) conducted the sacrificial rite. Then families retrieved and consumed their meat as the main part of their Passover meal, which also included unleavened bread and bitter herbs (recalling the Hebrews’ enslavement in Egypt).

Passover meals Jesus experienced in his lifetime would have had to be along these Temple-centered lines.

Then, in 70 C.E., approximately 40 years after Jesus’ death, Rome destroyed the Second Jerusalem Temple, thus ending the required central component of Passover observance, as sacrifice of paschal lambs by the Temple priests was no longer possible.

Instead, the early rabbis eventually introduced an inchoate, rudimentary practice that over the ensuing decades evolved into a new way of observing Passover. This would become known as a “seder,” Hebrew for “order,” because the ceremony followed a set sequence of liturgical recitations and ritual foods narrating the Passover saga, ultimately to be governed by an instructional guide called the *haggadah*. In our oldest reference, the early third century rabbinic compendium, the Mishnah, we read that Gamaliel II, the greatest rabbi of the post-destruction era (likely during the late 80s C.E.), customarily said: “Whoever does not mention [expatiate upon] these three things on Passover does not discharge one’s duty...: the Passover offering [lamb], unleavened bread, and bitter herbs” (*Pesahim* 10:5). Thus the core Temple-centered observance mutated from sacrificing lambs into drawing upon Passover motifs to retell the Hebrews’ escape from Egypt.

Centuries of further embellishment and refinement produced the full-fledged, mature seders we know today—the kind that many modern churches adopt and adapt in “reenacting” the Last Supper even though no such seder could have been practiced during Jesus’ day.

How the Confusion Began

If the Last Supper could not have been a seder, what led to modern-day associations of the two?

Early Christian theology contended that the primary purpose of the Jewish Bible (as yet Christians’ only scripture) was to signal Jesus’ coming. The Passover saga thereby became a major filter for heralding Jesus’ uniqueness. In the 50s C.E., Paul of Tarsus wrote of the “sacrifice” of Christ, “our paschal lamb,” urging Christians to avoid the “leaven of malice and evil” in favor of “the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1

Corinthians 5:6ff.). In 71 C.E., in the wake of the Temple's fall, Mark—followed by Matthew ca. 85 and Luke ca. 95—reimagined Jesus' Thursday night Last Supper (ca. 30 C.E.) as having been a Passover meal, most likely to correlate Passover, the festival of physical and political freedom for the Jews, with Jesus' death, which Christians claimed brought spiritual freedom, indeed salvation, for humanity. John, meanwhile, preferring to interpret Jesus himself as the paschal lamb, set that Passover meal on Friday night, 24 hours after Jesus' Last Supper, so as to coincide Jesus' death with that of the Passover lambs sacrificed shortly before that Friday evening's Passover meal. Thus, the various Gospel writers embellished Last Supper narrations with their own preferred Passover motifs in service to Christian theology.

In time, Passover-Easter became *the* most dangerous season for Jews in Christian Europe. Medieval mythology came to cast Jews as kidnapping and killing Christian children for their blood (supposedly needed to bake Passover matzah), an accusation resulting in torture, even death, for countless Jews charged with the (seasonal) reenactment of their ancestors' alleged murder of Jesus. Some Jews were even accused of deriving and adapting their seder from the Lord's Supper!

No wonder that, in recent times, Jews welcomed an astonishing pivot when Christians began to deem seders splendid vehicles for experiencing a taste of what Jesus' Jewish life had been genuinely all about. Responding in kind, Jews were now thrilled to invite Christians to local synagogues or Jewish homes to experience seders themselves.

Once the seder became imported into churches, however, the pendulum swung disturbingly too far. Passover was now transformed into an overtly Christian celebration—wherein Jewish *haggadot* were photocopied and repackaged with insertions of a Christological nature blatantly contrary to original rabbinic intent. Such fanciful notions included the death of the firstborn foreshadowing the death of Jesus (God's firstborn); the lamb's blood on wooden doorposts of Israelite homes in Egypt anticipating Jesus' blood on the wooden cross; the passing through the Red Sea heralding the sacrament of baptism—the Red Sea so named because of the saving blood of Jesus; the three pieces of matzah (centered on the table) representing the Trinity; the breaking of the middle matzah recalling the breaking of the body of Jesus (second person of the Trinity); the stripes on the matzah reminiscent of the lash marks from Jesus' whippings; and the matzah's tiny perforations recalling the stigmata piercing Jesus' hands, feet, and side.

Nowadays, these false notions continue to be promulgated and accepted in certain Christian circles, primarily among conservative Evangelicals, who welcome seder demonstrations by "Jews-for-Jesus" and "Messianic Jews." Fortunately, certain major Christian denominations—especially Roman Catholicism and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America—issued formal directives, even outright prohibitions, to their constituents against treading on Jewish sensitivities by staging misleading Passover celebrations.

In short, Jesus never practiced the kind of Passover meal that many churches stage today to "reenact" the Last Supper. Nor could this meal (ca. 30 C.E.) have been a seder, because in Jesus' time the festival was still observed as a Jerusalem Temple rite, without the set sequence of seder elements that became rudimentally defined in the decades after the Temple's fall some 40 years later—not to mention the seder's far more detailed embellishments in the centuries to come.

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