

# Lux Center News



April 25, 2016

## The Last Supper—Was It a Passover Seder?

The Jewish holiday of Passover begins at sundown on Friday, April 22<sup>nd</sup> and will be celebrated for the next eight days. That means that most Jewish households throughout the world are busily preparing for this important holiday by vigorously cleaning their homes to make certain that all leavened products made of grains, even crumbs, are removed, and by cooking lots of food for the Passover Seder meals. It is a time when family and friends gather together in their homes to eat symbolic foods and to retell the story of the exodus from Egypt to remind them of God's deliverance of the Jewish people from slavery. The experience is a sort of "dinner theater" following the sequence of the Seder (Hebrew word for order) and guided by the words of the Haggadah (script for the Seder).

I am always surprised by a number of Christian friends who tell me that they attend a Passover Seder at their churches during Holy Week. They have told me how moving this experience is—to actually experience what Jesus must have experienced at the Last Supper. This inspired me to do some research to find out what type of Seder might have taken place during the first century when Jesus lived.

### How is Passover described in the Hebrew Scriptures?

As written about Passover in the Five Books of Moses, Exodus 12, God instructs the Israelites to sacrifice a lamb on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the Hebrew month of Nissan. The Israelites are to eat the lamb with unleavened bread (*matzah*) and bitter herbs (*maror*). Lamb's blood should be put on their doorposts as a sign. God, seeing the sign will then "pass over" the houses of the Israelites while smiting the Egyptians with the tenth plague, the killing of the first-born sons. God then commands the Israelites to repeat the practice every year, "You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread, for on this day I brought you out of Egypt. You shall observe this day for all time." (Exodus 12:17).

### How was Passover observed in ancient times?

Once the Jerusalem Temple was built, Passover became one of the Jewish pilgrimage festivals. During the time of Jesus, the Jews would travel to Jerusalem to perform the sacrifice during the day at the Temple and consume it with *matzah* and *maror* after sundown.

### How did the Passover Seder become common practice?

After the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 76 C.E., it was no longer possible to perform the sacrifices. During the Rabbinic period, a number of customs began to accumulate around the Passover meal. Unleavened bread was broken, wine was served, diners reclined and hymns were sung. The Exodus story was retold and the significance of the unleavened bread and bitter herbs and wine were explained. This highly ritualized meal evolved over time into what we know as a Seder.

### Was the Last Supper held during Passover?

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) agree that the Last Supper was held after Passover had begun. In Mark 14:12, Jesus prepared for the Last Supper on the “first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb.” The Gospel According to John, however, records that the Passover festival does not begin until after Jesus is crucified. So, it is not clear whether the Last Supper meal took place before or during the Passover holiday.

### **What do scholars say?**

There are other issues discussed by both Christian and Jewish scholars that cause one to doubt that the Last Supper was a Passover Seder. First of all, virtually all are in agreement that, as a Jew, Jesus would have observed Jewish rituals as they were practiced in his day. There is abundant evidence that the Passover meals Jesus experienced in his lifetime would have had to be centered on the sacrifice of paschal lambs by the Temple priests. The Temple fell some 40 years after Jesus’ death. It took centuries of embellishment and refinement to produce the seders that we know today. So, the Last Supper could not have been a Seder.

There are definite parallels described in the accounts of the Last Supper with the Passover Seder observances. Characteristic elements shared by the Passover Seder and the Last Supper such as the bread and the wine, hymns and reclining diners are described.

Jonathan Klawans wrote in the October 2012 issue of Biblical Archaeology Review: “That Jesus ate a meal in Jerusalem, at night, with his disciples is not so surprising. It is also no great coincidence that during this meal the disciples reclined, ate both bread and wine, and sang a hymn. While such behavior may have been characteristic of the Passover meal, it is equally characteristic of practically any Jewish meal. . . . A number of scholars now believe that the ritual context for the Last Supper was not a Seder but a standard Jewish meal.”

Also, in the Gospels’ description of elements of the Last Supper, the narratives do not include the Passover lamb, bitter herbs or four cups of wine. These are important elements of the Passover Seder.

It appears that there is enough evidence to indicate that the Last Supper was not a Passover Seder. But in the end, I am not certain it really matters. What matters most is that Christians and Jews treat each other’s beliefs and practices with respect and that we continue to strive for mutual understanding.

### **According to the Catholic Bishops . . .**

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops are clear in stating what the Catholic Church says about celebrating a Jewish Seder. “The Seder . . . should be celebrated in a dignified manner and with sensitivity to those to whom the Seder truly belongs. The primary reason why Christians may celebrate the festival of Passover should be to acknowledge common roots in the history of salvation. Any sense of “restaging” the Last Supper of the Lord Jesus should be avoided . . .”

**The Lux Center for Catholic Jewish Studies looks forward to celebrating a Passover Seder at Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology on Tuesday, April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016 at 5:30 p.m. led by Rabbi Ronald Shapiro.**

**The Lux Center will welcome the new Lux Center Advisory Board on Thursday, May 5<sup>th</sup> at 6:15 p.m. in Room 200 at Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology.**