

PASSOVER : Four Questions

by Mark Robinson

The smiles on the faces of the Seder participants were indicative of the joy and pleasure present as the youngest child started reading the Four Questions. These questions would be answered in the narrative that follows in the Haggadah and are referred to as the *Mah Nishtanah*, after the opening words in Hebrew.

The questions are: Why do we eat only Matzoh on this night? Why do we eat bitter herbs on this night? Why do we dip the herbs twice on this night? And, why do we recline at the table? The first three questions come from the Mishnah. The fourth, the question about reclining, was added after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. to keep the number of questions at four. The question dropped dealt with the roasting of the Lamb sacrifice and became unnecessary after the Temple was destroyed. These questions lead to the unfolding of the evening with the reading of the Haggadah. Some have questioned the relevance of these questions in this day and age.

A cynical Hebrew poet thought there were far more important questions to be asked. A Haggadah printed in 1938 in Kibbutz Ein Harod in Israel asked the following four questions believing them to be more relevant. First, why is so much blood now being shed in the world? Second, why do people all over the world hate Jews? Third, when will the people of Israel return to this land? Fourth, when will our country be a fertile and luxuriant garden?¹

The compilers of this Haggadah never attempted to answer these questions. The centuries old tradition of reading and answering these questions will more than likely never be changed. There are four questions, though, that should be considered in much greater detail on some of the practices of the Passover. Questions that go to the heart and meaning of the purpose of Passover as God intended it to be understood.

These four questions are: (1) ***Why don't we have the lamb sacrifice that God required?*** (2) ***How important is the place of Elijah in the Passover Seder?*** (3) ***What is the origin, purpose and meaning of the afikomen?*** And (4) ***Why do we drink four cups of wine and what should we learn from them?***

THE LAMB SACRIFICE

"The paschal lamb, which our ancestors ate during the existence of the holy temple, what did it denote? It denoted that the Most Holy, blessed be he, passed over our father's houses in Egypt; as is said: And ye shall say, it is the Lord's sacrifice of the Passover, because he passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses. And the people bowed their heads and worshiped."

The above explanation read by the leader of the Seder as he elevates the shank bone of the lamb is one of the few places that even begins to touch on a basic truth of the Passover, a truth that transcends the Passover to a basic biblical principle that God established from the very beginning of the Word of God.⁵ The original Passover required the sacrifice of a lamb for a family to find redemption and protection by God. All Israelites were required to have a lamb sacrificed for their family and the blood of that lamb applied to the lintel and side posts of the door to the home so the first born would not die.

The need of a blood sacrifice was established soon after the first sin of man against God. In their disobedience to God's command, Adam and Eve knew they were wrong in their actions when they ate fruit from the one tree in the Garden of Eden that was prohibited to them. Of the probably multiplied

thousands of fruit trees, they sinned against God by eating from the one they were not allowed to eat. In shame they covered themselves with fig leaves trying to hide their condition. God would ultimately provide a different covering, coats of animal skins. Although not understood from these events in the third chapter of Genesis what God was obviously establishing, in light of the entire Word of God, was that sin could only be dealt with through a sacrifice, the death of an innocent party.

We see this same principle in the fourth chapter of Genesis with the story of Cain and Abel. Adam's sin now resulted in all of his offspring being born with a sin problem and thus in need of a sacrifice to find redemption and forgiveness of sin. Cain brought an offering to God of the best he had, the fruit of the ground, but it was rejected because the offering needed to be based on the shedding of blood. When Abel brought his offering of the firstling of the flocks, his offering was accepted.

What had been established in principle through these two events would become authoritatively confirmed through the Levitical sacrificial system that God would establish for the nation of Israel. If the system of sacrifice communicated nothing else to the Jewish people of ancient Israel, it would have communicated the horrible consequences of sin as innocent animals would be brought regularly to the Temple to be offered in place of individuals for the forgiveness of sin.

The rabbis identified eleven different public sacrifices that were to be offered to God.² The number of offerings in a year must have been in the hundreds of thousands at the minimum. At the time of the second Temple the Passover offering alone numbered as many as 256,500 lambs.³

The consequence of sin and the necessary blood sacrifice for redemption is a repetitive theme of the Jewish Scriptures. This principle was expressly stated in Leviticus 17:11. *"For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul."*

Without the Temple there is no longer the place of sacrifice and, thus, the ability to bring a blood offering for Passover. In the place of this offering we have substituted the shank bone of the lamb, symbolic of the lamb but not what God prescribed. We can not change God's demands to fit our ways. The principle of Leviticus 17:11 has never been abrogated. It is as true today as when it was first penned. Each of us is in need of a blood sacrifice for forgiveness of our sins. Passover is one of the methods God used to communicate this truth.

ELIJAH AND PASSOVER

With anticipation the young children look toward the door of the home. It is the time of the evening when a child goes to the door of the house, opens it, and looks outside to see if Elijah will join us for this Seder. The hope for many of the children is very real. I led one Seder at which the young girl came back with a dejected sigh and proclaimed, "He's not there," all the time anticipating that he would be at the door.

It is hoped that Elijah will come to the Passover so preparations are always made for him. A place setting is put on the table. An empty chair is placed in front of the setting. His wine cup is filled in anticipation of his presence. Finally, the door is opened.

This tradition is centuries old. Today, it is more of a quaint ritual emptied of all meaning rather than the expectant event it portrayed. As many haggadahs point out it is not the coming of Elijah, in and of itself, that is the focal point of this annual Passover routine. Rather, it is that Elijah will come before Messiah and is the herald of this one who will bring peace and redemption to the world.

Unfortunately, many Jewish people today have lost the hope of the Messiah. For those still clinging to this belief, there is confusion and misunderstanding on the identification and purpose of Messiah.

Elijah's purpose in coming at the Passover is to introduce us to the Messiah, to prepare, as it were, the way of his coming.

How would Elijah accomplish this goal if he appeared at the Seder? How would he point us to the Messiah? I believe the answer to this is clear. He would point us to the writings of the Hebrew prophets and their prophecies of the Messiah.

With the many false Messiahs that have offered themselves to Israel through the centuries, we are in need of an authoritative voice to speak to this issue. More so, we are in need of an impeccable source to substantiate the claims of the one asserting Messianic aspirations. God has given us this source in His Word. The Jewish Bible has many Messianic prophecies that allow us to examine any Messianic claimant and determine if he fulfills the criteria laid down by the prophets of Israel.⁸ For example, Elijah could mention that Micah said the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2); that Daniel said the Messiah would come before the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. (Daniel 9:26); and that Isaiah said the Messiah would die, be buried, and rise from the grave for the sins of the people (Isaiah 53). These and many other prophecies are how Elijah would help us recognize the Messiah of Israel.

THE AFIKOMEN

The highlight of the entire Passover Seder is the drama surrounding the afikomen. At the beginning of the evening the leader will lift up the tri-compartment matzoh bag and remove the middle board of matzoh. This middle piece is then broken and the larger part is wrapped in a white linen napkin and becomes known as the afikomen.

The afikomen is then hidden somewhere in the home. After the meal the children will search for the afikomen and the finder of it is rewarded with a gift. For a child this is the most anticipated part of the entire evening. I couldn't wait for the time when the meal would end and the search would begin.

The destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. had a major impact on the format of the Passover and the afikomen. The birth of Christianity and the surrounding culture, now that the Jewish people were in diaspora, also played a role in the way Passover evolved. Chaim Raphael in his *A Feast of History: The Drama of Passover Through the Ages* says, "[The Seder] was more sharply defined in its present form in the century after the destruction of the Temple - say between 100 9 and 150 CE." Raphael develops the influence Greek thought had on the development of the Seder later in his book.

The origin of the afikomen ritual is ancient, most likely predating the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. Jewish scholar David Daube⁴ argues persuasively that this is the case in his writings on the subject. Of extreme importance is his establishment of the afikomen with Messianic identification. He states "...the decisive framework for a Messianic ritual is there, in the early sources" in arguing not only for a Messianic understanding of the afikomen but for the use of the afikomen before 70 A.D. It is highly unlikely, though, that the drama of the matzoh bag of today was practiced before the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. Daube places today's routine as late as medieval times.

Simplistic beginnings of the afikomen have evolved to the present use of the matzoh bag and afikomen. Although various explanations are given for the three boards of matzoh, the primary explanation is they represent the Kohanim, the Levites, and the Israelites. The Messianic identification of the afikomen is important in understanding this ritual. Quoting Daube again, "... granted the likelihood that the triplication of the cakes and their naming after the three estates [Kohanim, Levites, Israelites] are of medieval provenance, both are plainly developments of an initial, simpler rite - which already contained the representation of the people and its Messiah by the unleavened bread ceremoniously eaten at the supper."

The afikomen, thus, represents the Messiah. Additionally, some Jewish sources also identify the afikomen with the Passover Lamb. The meaning and importance of this routine can now start taking focus.

Of the different explanations offered for the present ritual 10 of the afikomen, only one has any basis in historical events. This is the one offered by Jewish believers in Jesus. The matzoh bag and its three matzoh do not represent the unity of Israel and the Kohanim, Levites, and Israelites. Rather, the bag represents the one God of Israel and the three persons of the Tri-unity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These persons can be seen in a passage such as Isaiah 48:16.⁵

It is the middle matzoh, representative of the Son, that is removed and broken, just as Jesus left heaven, became a man, and died for the sins of the world. The larger piece of matzoh is then wrapped in a linen napkin becoming the afikomen, representing the Messiah as Jewish sources establish. The afikomen is then hidden and the child that finds it gets a reward or gift. Jesus, after his death, was hidden away, buried, but rose from the grave and those who find Him (accept Him as their personal Messiah) receive the gift of eternal life, Romans 6:23.

Finally, even the meaning of the word afikomen, which is Greek, argues for the Messianic understanding of this routine. The common Jewish explanation of the meaning of this word is either dessert or entertainment. Daube questions this understanding. He even makes the statement, "the Talmudic interpretations of the word Aphiqoman are wide off the mark - maybe deliberately so." The Greek word for afikomen is aphikomenos, used in the Greek as an aorist tense, and thus means "He has come."⁶

When the background of the Afikomen is understood its impact is enormous. It speaks of the Messiah who has come, was cut off and buried, brought back, and the finder of Him gets a gift. This is the biblical portrait of the work of the Messiah that is developed in detail in Isaiah 53 and corresponds with the ritual of the afikomen in the Passover Seder. The only one in history that fulfills this picture is Jesus.

FOUR CUPS OF WINE

One of the central elements in any Passover service is the four cups of wine. The four cups are named after the "I wills" of Exodus 6:6-7. Together they speak of the redemption God has promised to the Jewish people. *The New Haggadah* captures the intent of these four cups when it states, "These four cups symbolize the fourfold promise of redemption which, according to the Bible, God pledged to Israel: 'I will bring you forth,' (Ex. 6:6); 'I will deliver you,' (Ex. 6:6); 'I will redeem you,' (Ex. 6:6); and 'I will take you,' (Ex. 6:7)."

The importance of redemption symbolized in these cups is most vividly illustrated in the use of the third and fourth cup at a Passover Seder almost two thousand years ago. As Jesus sat at his last Passover before his death, He gave added meaning to the third cup, the cup of redemption, when "...He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:27-28).

This cup of redemption was symbolic of the redemption that He would provide in a few hours by the shedding of His blood. The long awaited, promised new covenant of the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, 31:31-34, would be instituted with the sacrificial death of the Messiah.

As the Passover Service comes to a close, there is one last cup of wine partaken of - the cup of acceptance. It is this cup that Jesus referred to when He said, "...I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:29).¹² Jesus knew that He would be rejected by the nation of Israel, just as the prophets had predicted. Israel

would turn her back on God's promised Messiah. Instead of the kingdom being established at this time, the Messiah became the sacrificial Lamb of God who would provide spiritual redemption for all people. John the Baptist's announcement of Jesus a number of years earlier, "*Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world*" started to become clearer in the minds of the Jewish disciples.

No, it was not at this time, that He would drink this last cup of wine with His people. That would have to wait for His second coming, the Kingdom Age, the promised time when Israel would embrace Him as their Messiah and King and they would be received as the children of God. The promise of acceptance of Exodus 6:7, "*And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God...*" will one day be realized. Israel will accept her Messiah and He will accept them. The prophet Zechariah saw this day when he penned the ultimate fulfillment of this promise, "*...they shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is my people, and they shall say, The LORD is my God.*" (Zech. 13:9) or as he said earlier, "*...and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced...*" (Zech. 12:10).

As Israel accepts her Messiah Jesus, God, in return, will receive them into His family and Kingdom. The time for the drinking of that fourth cup will have arrived. The redemption provided as illustrated in the third cup is now realized by Israel as illustrated by the fourth cup.

CONCLUSION

Four questions were posed at the beginning of this article dealing with some of the major themes of any Passover 13 Seder. Questions not often considered but vitally important in understanding how Passover communicates the truth of the Messiah to us.

Each of these Passover themes and questions, when understood and answered, point us to the only one that fulfills the pictures presented in the Seder. Jesus is the Messiah and the promised Lamb of God.

The first Passover, recorded for us in Exodus 12, is a portrait of the coming Messiah. Today, Passover is a picture of the work the Messiah did for us. This is why the New Testament says of Jesus, "*For even Christ (Messiah) our Passover is sacrificed for us.*" (I Cor. 5:7b).

Endnotes

1. Passover, edited by Mordell Klein, Jewish Publication Society of America, page 70, 1973.
2. The Temple: It's Ministry and Services, Alfred Edersheim, Hendrickson Publ., page 79, 1994, updated edition.
3. Josephus, Complete Works, translated by William Whiston, Kregel Publications, page 588, 1980.
4. The following quotes of David Daube come from a written version of his address at St. Paul's Lecture founded by the London Diocesan Council for Christian-Jewish Understanding.
5. For a more detailed consideration of this, contact Jewish Awareness Ministries for the author's pamphlet, "One God, or Three?"
6. Daube, David, *The Significance of the Afikoman*, Pointer, The Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues, London, Spring, 1968.