Passover and Easter
Origin and History to Modern Times

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Easter and Passover As Early Jewish-Christian Dialogue

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Introduction

Following the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., two competing interpretations were formed for Passover, one Jewish and one Christian. To replace the ritual of the defunct paschal sacrifice, each religion adopted the strategy of mandating the telling of a story. Jews adhered to the original meaning of the festival as deriving from the initial redemption from Egypt that served as a sign of a second deliverance still to come. Christians narrated the tale of a second redemption already in place: the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Both stories offered a liturgical alternative to the old sacrificial rite, addressing simultaneously the difficult question of how to celebrate a festival of redemption in an age of foreign domination and oppression. Both began with degradation (g’nut)—either Egyptian servitude or the crucifixion—and concluded with praise (shevach), holding out hope for the future.

The parallel development of two different narratives of a similar nature, meant for the same festival and introduced by two rival groups who lived alongside one another, ought to be discussed in a comparative manner. This similarity was less obvious in Rome and the West, which tended to detach itself from its Jewish origins by fixing Easter on a Sunday. A rival party known as Quartodecimans, however, retained the 14th of Nisan, the date of the Jewish Passover, as the date for Easter, and this custom, originating in Palestine, prevailed in the eastern communities of Asia Minor and Syria. The western tradition thus emphasized the resurrection which had occurred on a Sunday, while eastern tradition emphasized the crucifixion and its calendrical date of 15 Nisan.

At the end of the second century, Pope Victor tried to coerce the church into universal adherence to the Western Lord’s Day custom, by branding the Quartodecimans as heretics. His extreme measures met with opposition even from those circles that celebrated Easter on Sunday, but gradually, Roman practice prevailed, and at Nicea, Easter was fixed as the first Sunday after the first full moon following the spring equinox (March 21). The Quartodeciman alternative, now heretical, persisted until the end of the fourth century, but then was forgotten.

It is common knowledge that the decision at Nicea formalized the long-standing attempt to blur the inherent connection of Easter to its Jewish Passover origins. I claim here that a similar process of denial is evident in the early components of the Passover Haggadah, which is not just an attempt to fill the vacuum left by the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of the paschal sacrifice. The Haggadah is equally a response to the challenge of a rival Christian interpretation of the festival. Several Haggadah components reflect a conscious attempt to emphasize the validity of the Jewish interpretation over the Christian alternative.

We have, therefore, two complementary sides of a single process: on the one hand, an external debate, and on the other, a new definition of self-identity. If the Haggadah itself contains no explicit reference to Christianity, that is because it is a liturgical text, which tends by its very nature to mark the common consensus of the worshiping community by using “consensual value statements” that necessarily limit negations of alternatives to veiled references.

The Obligation to Tell a Tale

The discussion should begin with the similarities in the Christian and Jewish stories, and the ritual that defines the way they were told.
A. The Haggadah speaks of five Rabbis meeting for a seder at B'nci Brak. All night long, they relate the Exodus story, until at last, their disciples interrupt to remind them that the time for morning prayer has arrived. The Tosefta carries a similar story about R. Gamaliel and the elders in Lod, and although the skeletal story is the same, the Gamaliel group discusses the laws of paschal sacrifice (not the Exodus story), in recollection of the Temple ritual, and stop only when the cock crows (not when the students arrive).

B. The Haggadah, immediately following, presents an opinion of Rabbis Elazar ben Azariah and Ben Zoma, to the effect that the Exodus should be mentioned both day and night. A further citation by the sages indicates that the obligation to mention the Exodus will not be annulled by the coming of the Messiah.

All these segments are innovations of the immediate post-70 Yavneh generation; we have no evidence that the seder during the Temple period was centered around the telling of the Exodus story or the review of its laws.

A custom similar to A is attested to among Christians, who, however, recounted the story of the passion of Jesus, not the Exodus from Egypt. It is mentioned first in Epistula Apostolorum, an apocryphal composition datable to the third quarter of the second century c.e. According to the tradition, Jesus appears before his disciples and orders them to celebrate Passover by remembering his death. He warns that during the festival, one of them will be jailed for his faith, and will suffer for his inability to celebrate with the others. But Jesus promises to send an angel to save him. The doors of the prison will open, the prisoner will be set free, and will participate in the vigil with the rest of the group. At dawn, with the cock-crow, when the disciples finish remembering Jesus’s death, the prisoner will be returned to his cell.

Jesus is alluding to Peter’s release from jail on Passover (Acts 12), itself a midrash on the Exodus narrative. Herod is Pharaoh, the angel is Moses, and Peter is Israel. The angel wakes Peter at night “and a light shone in the prison”—paralleling the Haggadah’s characterization of the Exodus, “He has brought us forth from darkness to bright light.” The angel urges Peter to escape quickly, saying, “Arise quickly... Gird yourself, and bind your sandals”—as in Exodus 12:11, “This is how you shall eat the Passover: with your loins girded, and your sandals on your feet.” The four watches in prison are the four kingdoms, and the idea that the redemption from Egypt can be experienced personally recollects the Mishnah (Pes. 10,5: “In every generation one should see oneself as personally having left Egypt.”

Luke does not locate this episode on Passover eve, but it was so understood in the Epistula Apostolorum, where Jesus’ disciples celebrate Passover by remembering his passion and death in a feast that lasts all night long, until the cock crows. When Jesus reveals himself, he tells the group how he saved Peter from prison, referring to Passover eve as a night of vigil. But his freedom is short-lived; he must return to jail, a sign to the disciples that they must suffer too, until, as Jesus explains, he reappears with all who have been killed for believing in him. The meaning is clear: The parousia, the second coming, will occur only after the measure of suffering of the faithful is fulfilled.

The similarities between this Christian source and the two rabbinic accounts of keeping Passover eve are striking. The Rabbis too spend “all night” together, either recounting the Exodus story or discussing the laws of the paschal sacrifice. In the latter case, the cock crows to herald a return to routine: Peter returns to jail; the Rabbis return to morning prayer. In all three cases, we have sages (disciples or Rabbis) who gather together, not in their own homes, and tell a story of redemption. The non-family character of the Jewish assembly probably changed during the second century, when it became a family event that no longer lasted all night, a reflection of the seder’s crystallization as a ritual emphasizing a father’s obligation to relate the Exodus tale to his son. The Quartodecimans continued to celebrate until dawn, and their celebration retained a non-family character.
The B'nei Brak account (A) establishes the new edict to tell the story on Passover night. That is why the Haggadah follows it up with B, the Elazar ben Azariah fragment, which demonstrates the obligation to mention the Exodus at night. Now that fragment itself says that it reflects conditions during Elazar ben Azariah’s old age, about 120–130 C.E. We should therefore understand it as supporting the B’nei Brak episode—both of which require telling the story, and both of which are canonized within the Haggadah—as against the older Gamaliel source which discusses the laws of the sacrifice instead, and which is therefore excluded from the Haggadah, and known to us only from the Tosefta. The Haggadah accounts of B’nei Brak and Elazar ben Azariah provide a foundation narrative substituting the story of the Exodus for the sacrificial ritual.

The further homily in B, “all the days of your life,” includes the Messianic epoch too, as an implicit polemic against the messianic Jews who transformed the memory of the Exodus into their new Passover account of the crucifixion of Jesus, basing themselves on Jeremiah 23:7–8 and 31:31–32—where a new covenant is predicted and the obligation to tell about the Exodus is limited to the pre-eschatological era. Against that view, the Rabbis stress the obligation to recount the Exodus even in messianic times, just like the other commandments given at Sinai, for they too were considered null and void in the eyes of Christians.

The same motivation explains also the inclusion of the previous paragraph in the Haggadah, beginning, “We were once slaves to Pharaoh . . . .” which is justified as follows: “If the Holy One, Blessed be He, had not brought our ancestors out from Egypt, then we, our children and our children’s children, would have remained enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. Therefore, even if we were all wise, all men of understanding and experience, all fully versed in the Torah, we would still be obliged to tell about the Exodus from Egypt.” These words could have been aimed at those who doubted the continued pertinence of the story of the redemption from Egypt. Again, in the background is the alternative Christian story, which proposed a more relevant substitute.

Parallels between the Jewish Haggadah and Christian “Haggadahs”

Both Christianity and Judaism developed parallel “Passover eve liturgies” featuring story-telling and commemorating. They both follow the Mishnah’s prescription to “begin with degradation (g’nut) and end with praise (shevach),” so as to offer consolation and hope for future redemption. Scholars have generally assumed the absorption of early Jewish material into Christian tradition. Since it is accepted that the Jewish version is earlier, the Christian parallels have proved uninteresting to Jewish scholars.

But the discovery over fifty years ago of two important Christian texts should have changed all that. I refer to two tracts bearing the same name, About Easter (Peri Pascha), one by Melito of Sardis and the other by Origen.

Melito was a bishop in Sardis, who wrote in the seventies of the second century. He describes a visit to Palestine, so that his tract may reflect his experience there. In 1960, the greatest of all Haggadah researchers, Daniel Goldschmidt, published a history of the Haggadah without even mentioning Melito. Baruch Bokser’s 1984 account of the seder’s origins refers to Melito, but limits the discussion of Christian origins to four pages, viewing Christian alternatives as mere alternative data, and hostile at that. Passover is treated as a purely Jewish matter; the possibility of Christian influence is not even entertained.

But the perception of Passover as a time of redemption and sacrifice originates in the Bible that Jews and Christians shared. Similarly, in the case of parallels between rabbinic midrash and early Christian literature, sometimes a later Jewish text represents an earlier tradition that circulated orally and only later became crystallized in the Talmud or Midrash. We, however, should contest a method that gives automatic chronological precedence to midrashic texts that may be compiled hundreds of years later than Christian parallels. The Jewish view that sees Judaism as always influencing Christianity, but never the other way around, is theologically grounded, based on the
assumption that Judaism is the mother-religion of Christianity. But early Christianity and tannaitic Judaism are two sister religions that took shape during the same period and under the same conditions of oppression and destruction. There is no reason not to assume a parallel and mutual development of both religions, during which sometimes Judaism internalized ideas of its rival rather than the other way around. During the second and third centuries there were all kinds of Jews and all kinds of Christians, all struggling against pagan Rome and all sharing the centrality of the messianic idea and the ritual of Passover.

The problematic view that posits Judaism as the source of every Christian ritual or text is exemplified by scholarly opinion on the relationship between the Christian Improperia for Good Friday liturgy and the Passover Haggadah poem Dayyenu. The similarities between these two texts are apparent, and are discussed in depth by Eric Werner and Stewart G. Hall, both of whom adopt Goldschmidt’s claim that Dayyenu was composed during the last century of the Temple era and must therefore be a forerunner to the Christian parallel. But as Hoffman demonstrates, this assumption is unwarranted. Goldschmidt himself admits that tannaitic and amoraic literature never mentions Dayyenu, which appears first in the tenth-century prayer book of Saadiah Gaon, as an optional addition to the Haggadah. On the other hand, even though the Improperia itself is Byzantine, its origins (as Eric Werner has shown) go back to Melito of Sardis’s composition “About Easter”:

Israel the ungrateful [...] 
How much did you value the ten plagues? 
How much did you value the nightly pillar and the daily cloud, 
And the crossing of the Red Sea? 
How much did you value the giving of manna from heaven, 
and the supply of water from a rock, 
and the giving of Torah at Horeb, 
and the inheritance of the Land?

Despite its late appearance in Jewish literature, I believe (with Goldschmidt and against Hoffman) that Dayyenu was indeed composed long before the tenth century. But should we assume that a Jewish text of which our earliest knowledge is from the tenth century is the source of a Christian text known to us already eight centuries before? It is more likely that Dayyenu is part of the Jewish-Christian dialogue, and a reaction to the Christian criticism about Jewish ingratitude. Its praise to the God who delivers his people from Egypt, leads them in the desert, and brings them to the Land appears in Psalm 136, but then again in Psalms 78 and 106, as a means to criticize the ungrateful People of Israel. Melito used the latter, tying it for the first time (as far as we know) to Passover.

The eucharist is a clear imitation of the “last” Passover meal of Jesus, meaning, literally, thanksgiving. It therefore parallels the Jewish Hallel, a seder component that goes back to the time of the Temple. As late as the second century, the Jewish seder and the Christian eucharist maintained a common character of the Greek Agape (love) meal, a meal to which widows and orphans were invited, and in which people would eat together in groups and praise God. This is the context in which one should understand the dialogue between the Improperia and Dayyenu. The Christian prayer accuses the Jews of ingratitude; the Jewish prayer denies it. The end of Dayyenu, “[God] built us a Temple to atone for all our sins” is a kind of afterthought, indicating that Temple offerings atone, in contrast to the Christian claim that atonement comes through the crucifixion of Jesus. The location of Dayyenu in the center of the Haggadah and right before the words of Rabban Gamaliel addressed against the heretics (see below) is evidence of its importance as a Jewish response to these accusations.

The general view of Jewish and Christian ritual texts existing in mutual dialogue sheds new light on the Haggadah opening, Ha lachma anya, which begins, “This is the bread of affliction that our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt.” These words appear to be aimed against the Christian liturgical parallel drawn from Jesus’s words, “This is my body which is given for
you; do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19, e.g.). In Matthew (26:26) the formula includes also an invitation to eat: “Take, eat; this is my body,” a reminder of the Haggadah invitation with which Ha lachma anya continues, “Let all who are hungry come and eat.”

One could claim a reverse connection: that reading Ha lachma anya was an older ritual (from Temple times) that Jesus adapted to serve his own needs—a possible scenario, but unlikely. In the first place, it is hard to assume that Ha lachma anya was normally recited even before the crystallization of the Haggadah. In the second place, no tannaitic work mentions it. Once again we face the question of whether to assume that a Jewish text mentioned only in late sources predates and predetermines a Christian text that we know to be earlier. Even if we ignore the question of which text came first, it is at least hard to imagine that Jews used Ha lachma anya without having in mind the very similar liturgical formula that characterized Christian ritual.

It would seem that a new story requires new meaning for old symbols. The three symbols of Passover, pesach, metsah, and maror (paschal lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs) were awarded different meanings in each of the two religions. Christianity identified the pesach with Jesus, the lamb of God (agnus dei). Metsah was the body of the Savior (corpus Christi), a remembrance of the bread of the Last Supper; and maror became symbolic of the suffering of the Savior (passio dominii) or of the punishment awaiting the People of Israel for what they did to their Messiah. In a reversed parallel to this interpretation we find Rabban Gamaliel’s instructions (Pes. 10:5) that were incorporated into the Haggadah:

Rabban Gamaliel used to say: Whoever does not explain the following three things at Passover has not fulfilled his obligation: namely, pesach, metsah, and maror. What is the reason for the pesach that our ancestors ate in Temple times? It is because the Holy One, Blessed be He, passed over the houses of our ancestors in Egypt. Why do we eat metsah? Because there was not time for the dough to become leavened. Why do we eat this maror? Because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our ancestors in Egypt.

Rabban Gamaliel is demanding a declaration of loyalty to the Jewish interpretations and, therefore, an implicit denial of the Christian alternative. He goes so far as to claim that those who fail to do so fail also to discharge their festival duty, obviously because they may be rightfully suspected of heresy. Relevant here is the recollection that it was during the time of Rabban Gamaliel that Birkat Hamim, the “Benediction of the Heretics,” was composed as a liturgical formula to exclude Jewish-Christians. Rabban Gamaliel is also considered to have authored a sophisticated parody of the Gospel according to Matthew.

The assumption that the Haggadah was composed, in part, with an eye to excluding Christian heretics explains also the image of the wicked son in “The Four Sons Narrative.” Our Haggadah presents the wicked son as asking, “What does this service mean to you?” By throwing into question the laws and commandments (say our texts), “he excludes himself from the community and denies the foundation of our faith”—a description that suits the Jewish-Christian very well. We therefore see a new meaning to the answer that is assigned to the wise son (or to the foolish son, according to the Yerushalmi). It cites M. Pes. 10, 8, Ein maftirin achar hapesach afikoman, “One may not conclude the paschal lamb with afikoman.” In order to understand this cryptic remark, we must observe how Melito used the word afikonemos (meaning “coming”) in order to describe the incarnation and passion of Jesus. “It is he who is coming from heaven to earth” (Houtus afikomenos ex ouranon epi ten gen). Melito describes the afikoman of Jesus immediately after his sermon about the Passover being a symbol for him, thus completing his symbolic treatment of the pesach, metsah, and maror—paralleling the sermon of Rabban Gamaliel. The ruling that “One may not conclude . . . with afikoman” was meant to undermine the Christian interpretation.

This rabbinic struggle to meet the challenge of Christian exegesis includes yet another meal regulation, first encountered
among the amoraim (post–200 C.E.). While in mishnaic times, they ate first and then recited the Haggadah, by the amoraic era, they recited the Haggadah before the meal. David Daube properly locates this change in an attempt to counter the Christian interpretation of the festival symbolism.42

A second amoraic issue that concerns us here is the talmudic debate on the meaning of the Mishnah’s instructions to “begin with degradation and conclude with praise” (matchil big’nut um’sayem b’shevaḥ). In the opinion of Rav’ (d. 249), “degradation to praise” means, “In the beginning our fathers were worshipers of idols, but now the Ever-present One has brought us to his service”—that is to say, Israel is the chosen people. Immediately following are Joshua 24:2–4, on choosing Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. “Your forefathers lived beyond the Euphrates. . . . To Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. To Esau, I bequeathed the hill country of Seir, while Jacob and his children went down to Egypt.” The quotation ends here, even though the biblical text continues with the Exodus: “Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt. . . .” Stopping the quotation after the verse about the separation between Jacob and Esau may also have constituted a rejection of the Christian denial of the continued chosenness of Israel.43

The Midrash

The tendency to neutralize an alternative Christian interpretation is expressed especially in the midrash, the heart of the tannaitic Haggadah. The Mishnah (Pes. 10:4) imposes the duty to expound Deuteronomy 26:5–8 (Arami oved avi . . .): “My father was a wandering Aramite,” but interpreted to mean, “The Aramean sought to destroy my father.” The Haggadah came at some time to include a midrashic elaboration of those verses, juxtaposing the concise account from Deuteronomy with the longer version from the book of Exodus. We should ask why the Mishnah mandates the shorter Deuteronomic version to begin with.

Goldschmidt offered a literary solution: “The verses that discuss the miracle [in Exodus] are scattered, so the authors of

the Mishnah chose Arami oved avi [from Deuteronomy].” Moreover, “It was already part of the ritual recitation of the First Fruits, so was well known to the people, and its language was easy and simple.”44 But why would verses recited once annually at most, and only during Temple times, be better known than other verses of Torah? We should assume memory was facilitated not by the verses themselves but the homilies attached to them. The mishnaic demand to recite the passage thus remains unexplained.

We might imagine its preference of the short version of Deuteronomy as a mere accident or literary preference, were it not for the fact that Melito was already preaching on Exodus 12.45 The paschal sacrifice becomes a typological model for Jesus and the redemption merited through his blood.46 Origen too (third century) focuses on Exodus 12.47 The Rabbis therefore avoided Exodus in their own celebration.

Deuteronomy, moreover, omits two controversial motifs in Exodus: the festival sacrifice, and Moses’ name. Moses is absent throughout the Haggadah,48 and the midrash emphasizes:

A. “God brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand, with an outstretched arm, with great fearlessness, and with signs and wonders” (Deut. 26:8). . . . “Not through an angel, seraph or messenger,”49 but the Holy One, blessed be He, He alone, in His glory, as it is said: “I will pass through the land of Egypt in that night, and I will slay every first-born in the land of Egypt, from man to beast, and I will execute judgment against all the gods of Egypt, I, the Lord” (Exod. 12:12).

B. “I will pass through the land of Egypt”—I, and no angel, “I will slay every first-born”—I, and no seraph; “And I will execute judgment against all the gods of Egypt”—I, and no messenger; “I, the Lord”—I and no other.

In comparison with the other exegeses in the Haggadah midrash, this one is unique. The others rest content with citing the parallel from Exodus. Here, however, that parallel (A) attracts its own homily (B) to drum home the point that redemption is in God’s hands only. The expounder need not entirely give up the detailed account from Exodus. But by including it
as a gloss on Deuteronomy, where Moses is not mentioned, he can tell the story without mentioning the “messenger,” thereby refuting the view that Moses is an archetype of Jesus.

As we might expect, the ideological point recurs in the final lines, which expound the verse, “God brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great fearfulness, and with signs and wonders.” The final homily is: “‘With wonders’—that is the blood, as it is said: ‘I will show wonders in heaven and on earth, blood and fire and pillars of smoke’” (Joel 3:3). The citation from Joel is striking, since its context is eschatological: “In those days I will pour out My spirit... I will set portents in the sky and on earth, blood and fire and pillars of smoke; the sun shall turn into darkness and the moon into blood, before the arrival of the great and terrible day of the Lord” (Joel 3:2–3).

Elsewhere in this volume, I deal with “The Great Sabbath” (Shabbat Hagadol). Suffice it to say here that in regard to Passover, the name conjures up hints of the messianic—an expectation, therefore, of Joel’s “great and terrible day of the Lord.” The same verse is expounded in Acts 2 regarding the occurrence during Pentecost, seven weeks after the crucifixion, when the apostles were treated to a sort of a private revelation at Sinai.

Peter’s claim is that Joel’s “signs and wonders” have materialized in Jesus. Proclaiming Jesus the Messiah (the kerygma) recalls Deuteronomy 4:34: “Has any god ventured to go and get for himself one nation from the midst of another, by prodigous acts, by signs and portents, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and awesome power, as Adonai your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?”

The same two verses from Joel and Deuteronomy that served Peter are incorporated in the Haggadah midrash. The midrash ends with Joel, but Deuteronomy 4:34 appears earlier: “‘With great fearfulness’—this refers to the revelation of the Divine Presence, as it is said: ‘Has any god ventured to go and get for himself one nation from the midst of another...’” We should assume that Jewish and Christian homilists used similar materials to debate the meaning of “signs and portents.”

Christians, the “great fearfulness” of Deuteronomy is echoed in the Pentecost experience of Acts when “fear came upon every soul.” For the Jew, however, the signs and wonders are unique to Egypt. The Exodus is not a model for a messiah that has already come, but for one who is yet to arrive.

With this in mind, we can return to another exegesis in our Passover midrash: “He saw our ill treatment: that is, the cessation of sexual relations, as it is said: ‘God looked upon the children of Israel and God knew.’” Daube suggests that the homily depends on using “and God knew” in the biblical sense of “knowing as intercourse,” the point being that the Israelites practiced abstinence, but managed to have offspring miraculously. He refers to an early (pre-Christian) Jewish tradition about a supernatural pregnancy, that for some obscure reason remained in the Haggadah. I think the homily counteracts the Christian claim of Jesus’s miraculous birth. For Jews, such a birth did occur, but only in Egypt, again as an archetype of redemption yet to come.

Hence the enigmatic opening of the midrash:

Go and learn what Laban the Aramean planned to do to our father Jacob; for Pharaoh decreed only that the male (children) should be put to death, but Laban had planned to uproot all, as it is said: Arami oved avi sayered mitsra’ima... “compelled by Divine decree.”

The most straightforward interpretation of this verse is that it deals with Jacob the Aramean, who was exiled (oved = “lost”) from his home. So the verse was understood in the Septuagint and Sifre, and probably by Melito too. Melito describes Jesus as taking his believers from slavery to freedom, from darkness to light, from death to life, and from bondage to the kingdom-come. Jesus suffered greatly: he was the slain Abel, the bound Isaac, the exiled Jacob, Joseph who was sold, Moses who was put into the basket, the slaughtered paschal sacrifice, and the persecuted David. Stewart Hall and Shlomo Pines noticed the parallel between the beginning of Melito’s sermon and what the Haggadah says of God: “He brought us forth from slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, from mourning to
festivity, from darkness to bright light, and from bondage to redemption.” 57 It is therefore quite possible that what we have here is part of a Christian-Jewish Haggadah from Palestine. 58

At any rate Melito explicitly adds “the exiled Jacob” to the chain of the typologies of the suffering Jesus, possibly building on John 4:12, where the Samaritan woman asked Jesus: “Are you greater than our father Jacob?” 59 He understands the “Aramean” passage as referring to himself, whereas the Haggadah alters the meaning until it no longer refers to “a wandering” ancestor at all.

The Targum tradition too changes the verse to say, “Laban the Aramean tried to destroy my father.” But how do we know that Laban wanted to kill Jacob, especially since in Genesis 31:24, an angel warns him, “Beware of attempting anything with Jacob, good or bad,” and there is no mention of any intention to kill him. Second, how does the expounder know that Jacob went down to Egypt “compelled by Divine decree”? Decree (hadibbur) here is logos, meaning an angel, but where do we find an angel commanding him to go to Egypt? Third, how can we fathom the heart of the Haggadah opining that Laban’s intention to kill Jacob was worse than Pharaoh’s murder of the Israelite children?

This framing of Laban as the antagonist in the Haggadah caused Louis Finkelstein to date the Haggadah to the last part of the third century B.C.E. as a pro-Egyptian (Ptolemaic) and anti-Syrian (Seleucid) polemic. 60 Finkelstein also noted the similarity between “Aramean” (Arani) and “Roman” (Romai), 61 so that, as Hoffman claims, 62 the midrash may be a gloss on life under Rome. Laban personifies Rome, whose bondage was worse than that of Egypt. Jacob symbolizes Israel the people; as his exile in Egypt was temporary—he did not go there to settle—so Israel’s new exile will not last.

The typological account of the midrash is based on the skeletal narrative frame whereby an evil man (Laban) wants to kill a good man (Jacob); an angel orders the good man to go down to Egypt for a limited time. By substituting Herod the Edomite for Laban the Aramean, and Jesus for Jacob, we get the following: “The angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, ‘Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and remain there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.’ When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and left for Egypt” (Matt. 2:13–14).

Both stories are built according to the same scheme. For the Evangelist, (1) Herod (2) sought to destroy (3) Jesus. But (4) at the command of an angel, (5) he went down to Egypt temporarily. For the Haggadah, (1) Laban (2) sought to destroy (3) Jacob. But (4) when forced by divine decree, (5) he went down to Egypt temporarily.

The narrative topos that served the Gospel—the birth of the Christian savior, the danger that threatened him, his going to Egypt and being saved—thus served the Jewish expounder as well with regard to Jacob. 63 But the Gospel came first, so that we observe another instance of the prior Christian redemption story being directed in a Jewish way.

Conclusion

The Haggadah represents the Jewish dialogue with the Christian interpretation of Passover. That dialogue revolves about a shared hope of redemption, but is polemical in nature, because it includes common material used differently by each group to define itself by negating the other. Melito adopts the harshest tone, a strong rejection of Judaism. Jews react with greater restraint, but respond to objections raised against them by Christian homilies. The reading of the Haggadah becomes a pledge of allegiance to the Jewish religion. It differentiates friend from foe, implicitly rejecting Christianity’s historical, eschatological, and theological interpretations. 64 Its rejection is religious, therefore, not political; the political enemy is still Rome, from whose oppression the Rabbis yearn to be freed.

This interpretation of the Haggadah and the seder support the following reconstruction.

During the time of the Temple the celebration of Passover included two main components: the sacrificial meal and the Hallel. For two generations after the Temple’s destruction,
instead of the defunct sacrifice, people generally ate a roasted kid (a custom, perhaps, in distant communities before the Destruction as well) and studied the laws of the sacrifice that they could no longer perform. This is the tradition described in the Tosefta’s account of scholars gathering to study the laws of Passover all night long. At this stage, the Christian midrash on Exodus 12 and the paschal sacrifice emerged. In response, the Jewish Haggadah distanced itself from sacrifice and emphasized instead the duty to tell the story of the Exodus, as described in the Mishnah (M. Pes. 10). This stage was crystallized by the beginning of the second century C.E.

A family celebration thus developed, revolving about educating children and observing the commandment, “You shall tell your son”—parallel, in Christianity, to the baptism of new believers. The dispute between the Jewish interpretation of the festival and the Christian one is already evident: one tells the tale of Passover in Egypt, the other, the Passover in Jerusalem.

By taking into account Christian interpretations, the Haggadah forced the issue of the Quartodeciman alternative, so that the Christian celebration shifted from Nisan 14 (with an emphasis on crucifixion and sacrifice) to Easter Sunday and an emphasis on resurrection-redemption. A similar process occurred in tannaitic Judaism, as the seder changed from being a celebration emphasizing sacrifice (Rabban Gamaliel) to a celebration of the Exodus event and the redemption it symbolized.

This reconstruction assumes that the Haggadah’s liturgical origin did not evolve as a rabbinical and Jewish tradition alone, but as a dialogue with a rival liturgy. If those who think that Mark’s Gospel was written right after the Destruction as a “Christian-Jewish Haggadah for Passover” are right, then we should perceive even the Gospel as liturgical, not just theological-historical—like the Torah which served as a public reading. If so, it may be that already in the generation following the Destruction, Christian-Jews “told” their story of redemption by reading the Gospel. The Passover Haggadah is thus a Jewish “counter-Gospel”—one story opposite another, one Haggadah opposite another.

That may account for the similarity between the midrash on Deuteronomy 26 and the Christian story: the midrash offers an alternative to the birth of Jesus (“Laban wanted to destroy everything”), followed by a description of the suffering of Israel in Egypt (opposite the suffering of Jesus on the cross) through a description of the redemption in Egypt (but “not by an angel,” that is, by a savior), and concludes with Joel 3:3 hinting at the Pentecost (“I will pour out my spirit”) that recurs at the end of the “life” of Jesus.

Our survey has linked many of the central rubrics of the Passover Haggadah to an anti-Christian polemic, suggesting that we ought to reevaluate the intense and difficult struggle waged by the great religious reformers, Christian and Jewish, during the generations after the destruction of the Temple. Accordingly, rabbinic literature should be read not only as a source for Christian ideas and rituals, but also as a reaction to them, because in its deepest meaning, the Oral Law should be seen as the Jewish response to the Christian New Testament.

Appendix: This Research in Context

The interpretive assumptions on which this article is based were pioneered by David Daube, and even earlier by Robert Eisler, who claimed already in 1925 and 1926 that the afikoman parallels the host of the Christian ritual. Though a New Testament scholar, Eisler knew little about Judaism, so that his article contains grave errors. However, these are not enough to refute his main argument, which breaks new ground in exposing the parallel development of Passover and Easter.

Eisler’s approach provoked Jewish and Christian detractors. Immediately following the publication of the first part of his article, Hans H. Lietzmann (the editor of the journal in which it appeared) asked him to retract his second installment. Eisler refused, going so far as to hire an attorney and threaten a law suit should Lietzmann renege on his prior commitment.
Lietzmann was forbidden even to append an editorial note saying that the article was being published under legal duress. So Lietzmann opened the contents of volume 25 (1926) both with his own article criticizing Eisler and with a strong rebuttal by Marmorstein. Eisler demanded the right to respond in volume 26, but Lietzmann refused. Eisler offered to publish Lietzmann’s own response in a journal outside Germany, if Lietzmann would at least include Eisler’s remarks in the “Letters from Abroad” section, but Lietzmann was adamant. Eisler remained isolated, attacked on all sides and unable to respond to his critics.

Forty years later (1966), Daube gave a lecture about the afikoman in St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. In it, he validated in principle Eisler’s interpretation, correcting Eisler’s errors and adding his own innovations. Daube related the bitter fate of Eisler, and expressed doubts about whether it was the right time to return to comparisons between Christianity and Judaism. As an example of his fears, he cited the fact that Goldschmidt’s recent edition of the Passover Haggadah never mentions the New Testament, even though it contains much evidence of the antiquity of Passover customs. It appears that Daube doubted the wisdom of reopening the debate, since he avoided wide publicity for his lecture, and published it in an offprint that circulated only by personal request to the secretariat of the committee for Christian-Jewish understanding in London. Contrary to Eisler, Daube was not silenced, but his interpretation remained on the margins of Haggadah research and has yet to receive appropriate academic attention.

NOTES

This essay was written after a 1995 stay in the Center for Jewish Studies, University of Pennsylvania, and was published in expanded form in Hebrew (Tarbiz 65, no. 1 [October/November 1995]: 5–28).


9. Research often assumes that the Haggadah predated the Temple’s destruction. Finkelstein even placed it prior to the Hasmoneans
(cf. his “The Oldest Midrash: Pre-Rabbinic Ideals and Teachings in the Passover Haggadah,” HTR 31 [1938]: 291–317; idem, “Pre-Maccabean Documents in the Passover Haggadah,” ibid., 35 [1942]: 291–332; 36 [1943]: 1–38). His theory is rejected by Goldschmidt (Haggadah shel Pesach V' Toldoteha [Jerusalem, 1960], pp. 31–39), who held, however, that early parts of the Haggadah were composed during Temple times. He follows (p. 55, n. 77d) G. Alon, for whom, even though there is no “clear evidence” that the Haggadah was used that early, it is “reasonable to assume that it existed.” See G. Alon, Toldot Hay’hadim Bel’erez Yisrael Bit’kufat Hamishnah V’Hatalmod, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv, 1967), pp. 164–66. E. Urbach assumes that Philo’s directions “to maintain in prayers and songs the custom of the ancestors” refer to Deuteronomy 26 (on which the Haggadah Midrash of the Haggadah is based). Without textual support, he believed that “the ancient custom was to read that story when bringing the Passover sacrifice.” See his critique of Goldschmidt, Kiryat Sefer 36 (1961): 144–45. See also Joseph Tabory, “Al Nusach Hahaggadah Bizman Habayit,” Sinai 82 (1978): 97–108; idem, “Hachagigah Hakerevah im Hapesach: Mitus O Mtsi’ut?” Tarbiz 64 (1995): 49. Tabory assumes that the obligation to recite the Exodus account existed already in Temple times. However, the Haggadah itself shows no evidence of composition prior to the Destruction, and no source predating the Destruction testifies to the custom to recite the Exodus story. The only known Passover liturgy from the time of the Temple is the Hallex (M. Pes. 5, 7; Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26). The Hillelites are said to have added Psalm 114 (“When Israel left Egypt . . .”) to the Hallel so as to mention the Exodus at night (T. Pes. 10:9), an event that may have led, after 70, to the obligation to tell the story of the Exodus. In cordial conversations (1995), Dr. Shlomo Cohen raised three arguments that strengthen the claim that reciting the Haggadah was not customary during the time of the Temple. (1) M. Pes. 9:3 mentions only the eating of the sacrifice and the recitation of Hallel, never mentioning the recitation of the Exodus account as an obligation. (2) T. Pes. 10 discusses only the Hallel; the custom of R. Gamaliel and the elders to discuss the laws of the Passover sacrifice is mentioned in 12–13, but here too there is no hint of the obligation to tell the story. (3) Pes. 85a discusses the Passover offering prior to 70 but also omits any reference to a recitation of the Exodus.


ff,” New Testament Studies 4 (1957): 210–15. Schwartz (“Ben Stada and Peter”) sees the talmudic story about Ben Stada who was killed in Lydda on Passover eve (San. 67a) as a Jewish version of this story.


15. Lohse, Passafest, p. 94; Huber, Passau und Ostern, p. 9. According to M. Pes. 10:9, the sacrifice ended by midnight.

16. R. Elazar’s dictum is cited in M. Ber. 10, but without connection to the Haggadah (see S. Lieberman, Tosafot Kifshu’ah to Ber., p. 12).

17. In M. Batehah 2:7, Gamaliel (against the sages) also orders the preparation of a roasted kid (see Bokser, Origins of the Seder, pp. 101–6), again retaining the link between seder and paschal sacrifice.


21. Hall, Melito, p. xii.

22. Ibid., p. 76.


27. Goldschmidt, *Haggadah*, p. 50. Finkelstein too (“Pre-Maccabean Documents [1943],” p. 73) dates *Deyyenu all the way back to the third century B.C.E.*, but his speculations are groundless.


29. Melito, paras. 87–88 and 84–86.


32. Suggested to me by Dr. Shlomo Cohen. Indeed this is how Aphrahat’s *Twelve Arguments* ends.

33. A resemblance between *Ha lachma anya* and “This is my body” was already recognized by the Renaissance man, Joseph Scaliger, who thought Jesus had drawn on the Haggadah. See A. Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship* (Oxford, 1993), p. 316. Hoffman has published an important analysis of *Ha Lachma*, which he dates after the Destruction, in accordance with the *matsalh* becoming the substitute for the Passover sacrifice. Hoffman also describes the parallelism with the status of the bread in the Last Supper. See Lawrence A. Hoffman, “A Symbol of Salvation in the Passover Haggadah,” *Worship* 53 (1979): 519–37, reprinted in volume 6 of this series as “A Symbol of Salvation in the Passover Seder.”

34. John 1:29: “Behold the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world”; 1 Cor. 5:7: “Clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our Paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed.” See also Lohse, *Das Paschafest*, pp. 52–55.


40. Suggested by Finkelstein (“Pre-Maccabean Documents [1943],” p. 12). D. Daube (*The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* [London, 1956], pp. 158–69) noted the parallelism between the “Four Sons” of the Haggadah and Matthew 22, but assumed Matthew was influenced by the Haggadah, whereas one should consider that it was the other way around.


43. Aphrahat’s Passover homily opens by denying Israel is still the Chosen People.


45. Melito, paras. 1–2.

46. His words, “Understand, therefore, beloved, how it is new and old, eternal and temporary.” Cf. Passover poem by Yannai, “That which was in the beginning will also be at the end.” (Z. M.
Rabinowitz, *Piyutot Rabbi Yannai Latorah Ul'mo'adim*, vol. 1 [Tel Aviv, 1985], p. 300.


50. See the discussion in part 2 of this volume, “Passover in the Middle Ages,” pp. 128–42.


69. On Eisler personally, see Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem* (Tel Aviv, 1982), pp. 150–56.


71. David Daube, *He That Cometh*.


PART 2

*Medieval Developments*
Passover in the Middle Ages

ISRAEL J. YUVAL

My earlier essay dealt with the similarity of the narratives that came to mark the Jewish Passover and the Christian Easter. Here I wish to compare their medieval ritual and symbolism. That early era had featured a relatively mutual give-and-take between the two, but by the eleventh or twelfth centuries, relationships had become totally one-sided. In the second and third centuries, Christians had been persecuted while Jews enjoyed the status of religio licita, whereas by the twelfth century, things were reversed: the church was now triumphant, and Jews were “serfs of the imperial chamber,” or indentured to the apostolic throne. Where, therefore, Passover and Easter customs display medieval similarities that do not hark back to antiquity, they reflect Christian influence upon Judaism, not the reverse.

Moreover, in the Middle Ages, the two holidays of Passover and Easter had become the focal point for displays of hatred and the occasion for libels against Jews. By the thirteenth century, it was not uncommon to find Jews charged with killing Christians to obtain their blood for Passover. But the real novelty of that century was a new charge: that Jews desecrated the host.1 I wish to clarify the ritual backdrop for that libel, without, however, denying the causal significance of the doctrine of transubstantiation. Behind the charge against the Jews was the need to extract the acquiescence of Christians who denied the miraculous change of essence in which they had difficulty believing. At the same time, the charge of host desecration is an extension of the blood libel, since it followed from the doctrine