

## **Biblical Theology**

### **A brief exploration of the theological concepts contained within the 'Passover' paradigm of John 18 & 19.**

**by Conrad Vine.**

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## Introduction.

John 18 & 19 contains explicit references and allusions to the Passover<sup>1</sup>, the first of the three major feasts in Judaism's cultic calendar at the time of Christ<sup>2</sup>, and these Johannine Passover references would have given a clear theological framework for contemporaries, within which they could interpret the Johannine passion narrative.

Different understandings developed concerning the significance of this Passover framework<sup>3</sup>, but are these understandings mutually exclusive, or is there scope for parallel understanding utilizing a number of inter-related motifs within the Johannine portrayal of the passion narrative?

This paper will utilize the following methodology<sup>4</sup>:

- a) A brief outline of attempts to reconcile the passion narratives.
- b) An outline of contemporary Passover understanding.
- c) An outline of Johannine Passover understanding.
- d) A conclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> Explicit references include John 18:28, 39, 19:14, and allusions include John 19:28-29, 31, 35-37.

<sup>2</sup> The three major feasts were: Passover (celebrated at the full moon of the first month of a vernal new year – the lambs were slain on the 14<sup>th</sup> of the month of Nissan); Weeks (a harvest festival which was seven weeks after the first barley and cereal harvests, it came to be known by the name 'Pentecost', a Greek reference to the fifty days that elapsed between the time of the waving of the first harvest sheaf before the Lord in the temple to the actual feast itself); and Tabernacles (also known as Booths, this feast recalled the Israelites' wanderings in the desert after the Exodus, and required the celebrants to live in temporary shelters for the duration of the feast). There were other feasts at the time of Christ in cultic Judaism, e.g. Purim and the Day of Atonement, but these were not as well attended as the above three feasts. The Feast of Unleavened Bread lasted from the 15<sup>th</sup> Nissan for an entire week, and as it was linked so intimately with the Passover Festival, the two feasts became linked in the minds of the populace and later historians.

<sup>3</sup> Based on these early understandings within the contemporary *sitz im leben*, the Eastern Church developed a primary understanding of Christ being the Suffering Servant of Deutero-Isaiah, whilst the Western church has preferred an understanding of Christ, the 'Lamb of God', being the anti-typical paschal lamb.

<sup>4</sup> All texts quoted are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America (1989).

### **The passion narratives within John's Gospel and the Synoptic Gospels.**

Based on the passion narratives, there is ongoing debate concerning the exact chronology and concomitant theological significance of the Passion Week. The Synoptic Gospels portray the Last Supper as a traditional Passover meal celebrated in the evening of Nisan 14 after the Passover lambs had been slain, with the crucifixion on the following day, Nisan 15<sup>5</sup>, the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. John however indicates that Jesus was crucified at the time the Passover lambs were being slain, on Nisan 14, implying that the Last Supper was not a traditional Passover meal, but a specially arranged Passover meal or farewell fellowship meal between Jesus and His disciples<sup>6</sup>.

Scholars have attempted, and continue attempting, to determine the 'outside' of the events<sup>7</sup>, i.e. the where, what, how and when of the final events leading to Christ's crucifixion, seeking to harmonize the perceived discrepancy in the accounts.

Various solutions have been proposed, including that a) the Synoptics are correct, and that John's reference to 'the Passover' is actually to a ceremonial meal connected with the Feast of Unleavened Bread, b) that John is correct, and that the Synoptics' 'Passover meal' was a private ceremonial meal before the official Passover, c) that the Last Supper was a true 'Passover meal' as in the Synoptics, but celebrated 24 hours earlier than the official Passover meal, as per John's chronology, and d) that there were dating disputes within the sects of Judaism, and that Jesus celebrated the Passover meal on Thursday Nisan 14 in accordance with conservative Pharisaical calculations (as per the Synoptics' records), whilst the Sadducees celebrated the Passover on Friday Nisan 14, (as per John's chronology)<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> C.f. Mark 14:12, Luke 22:7-8, Matthew 26:17.

<sup>6</sup> John 18:28 and John 19:14, 28-37 lead to this conclusion.

<sup>7</sup> The 'outside' of an event in historical-critical research is defined as 'a description of the various empirically observable data constitutive of it' (i.e. the event itself), taken from Smith, B. 'Jesus' Last Passover Meal', Mellen Biblical Press (1993), p. 2, and is ascertained using such interrogatives as who, when, what and how.

<sup>8</sup> Summary information taken from the 'The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary', Review and Herald Publishing Association (1980), Volume 5, pp. 532-540. There is extensive literature however on this perceived 'problem' of the chronology of the passion week and how it relates to the Passover celebrations, and most publications address the problem in one way or another. For critical scholars, the problem is quite simply an historical inaccuracy, probably from John, who is viewed as amending the

Ultimately though, however interesting it may be, the exercise to determine the ‘outside’ of the events is futile given the lack of additional historical data, although it is significant that there is no record within the apostolic church of disputes about the historicity of any of the passion narratives.

What is far more important given John’s purpose in writing his gospel<sup>9</sup> is his understanding of the ‘inside’ of the events as recorded, the ‘why?’, for it is John’s ‘inside’ understanding (under the *Paraklete*’s guidance) which provides the theological significance of passion narrative<sup>10</sup>.

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historical reality to accord with his overall theological purpose in writing which is ‘that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name’ (John 20:31). Much has been written by scholars such as E. Ruskstuhl and H. Hoehner on the topic since a seminal work by Annie Jaubert, who argued that Jesus kept the Essene Passover, and therefore celebrated the Passover before the priests and most other Jews of His time. However, from a conservative theologians perspective it can be argued that a) we simply do not have a complete record of how Passover was celebrated in Christ’s time, b) there were considerable sectarian disputes within Judaism concerning the dates and methods of celebration of all the major festivals, and that allegiance to a particular sect within Judaism was evidenced by the manner in which one celebrated a particular feast or rite, c) that astronomical, dating and weather data are simply inconclusive concerning the exact time of the Passover celebration from A.D. 27 – A.D. 33 (weather was important, as the Sanhedrin proclaimed when a Passover would be after it had received evidence from reliable witnesses concerning the first sightings of the new moon in the month of Nisan. The date was then communicated through bonfires to the Diaspora, but as enemies of the Jews lit fires to confuse the process, the Sanhedrin resorted to sending out messengers as soon as the Nisan new moon was confirmed). It is therefore not possible to exclude the possibility that both John and the Synoptics were all correct, albeit with differing emphases.

<sup>9</sup> John 20:31, ‘But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name’.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, B. ‘Jesus’ Last Passover Meal’, Mellen Biblical Press (1993), p. 2.

## Contemporary Passover<sup>11</sup> understanding.

In Christ's time, the contemporary understanding of the Passover<sup>12</sup> included the following elements:

*Redemption:* Passover celebrated God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian oppression, and the establishment of Israel as a new nation within a covenant relationship with God, and was so important that it became the start of the religious year<sup>13</sup> (Ex. 12:2).

Jewish culture attributed (possibly erroneously) many of the key events in Israelite history to the time of Passover<sup>14 15</sup>. In addition, Jews expected the future deliverance of

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<sup>11</sup> The name 'Passover' (Hebrew. *pesah*) comes from the events recorded in Exodus 12:1-50, when the Lord 'passed over' the Hebrew homes that had smeared the blood of a lamb on their doorposts and lintel as He moved across Egypt to destroy the firstborn in every household. The subsequent annual celebration of this event was called 'Passover' in recognition of God's actions of mercy to spare those who had trusted in His provision of mercy and salvation in the Exodus event. Moishe, C. & Moishe, R. 'Christ in the Passover', Moody Press (1978), p. 22, argued that this understanding gives God an overly passive role in the event, linking 'Passover' to the Egyptian word '*pesh*', meaning to 'spread wings over' in order to protect. God is portrayed therefore as actively sheltering the faithful Israelites, spreading His wings over to cover and protect each blood sprinkled door. God was therefore acting proactively and redemptively in the midst of His judgment on the Egyptians.

<sup>12</sup> A distinction needs to be made between the 'Egyptian' and the 'Permanent' Passovers. The *Mishnah* made a distinction between the two based on the regulations outlined in Exodus 12. The Egyptian Passover was originally a meal within a household, eaten standing up and fully dressed, the paschal lamb was killed by the head of the household, and there was no overt cultic symbolism or processes attached other than those given in Exodus 12. The Permanent Passover had evolved over the period of the monarchy and the inter-testamental period to a national celebration centered in Jerusalem. The paschal lambs were now slain in the Temple accompanied by the singing of the *Hallel*, the paschal lamb had to be eaten within the city boundaries of Jerusalem (including the Mount of Olives but not Bethany or Bethphage), it was to be eaten by groups of 10-20 persons, all of whom were to be free and not slaves or bound persons, and it was to be eaten lying down, symbolizing the freedom of those who participated in the feast, whilst the slaves and servants were to stand at the outside of the table gathering and serve. The requirement to eat the Passover meal within Jerusalem's boundaries explains why Christ ate the Lord's Supper in Jerusalem itself and spent His last night in Gethsemane rather than in Bethany where he was staying during the beginning of the Passion Week.

<sup>13</sup> In contemporary Judaism, the cultic year began in Nisan (about the time of the Spring equinox), the civil year began in Tishri (about the time of the Autumn equinox), and there were two other 'years', from the month of Elul to Elul for the tithing of herds and flocks, and from Shebat to Shebat for taxing fruit crops (Edersheim, A. 'The Temple: it's Ministry and Services as they were in the time of Christ', James Clark & Co. Ltd (1959), pp. 203-204).

<sup>14</sup> A reading of the Old Testament indicates that the observance of the Passover, or the lack of observance, can be used as a gauge of the overall spiritual nature of the people of Israel. Numbers 9:1-5 records what appears to be the only Passover celebrated in the wilderness, and occurs after a period of apostasy and when Israel is trying to re-enter their covenant relationship with God. When the Israelites entered Canaan under Joshua's leadership, they celebrated Passover (Jos. 5:6-11) after all the men had been circumcised, and before they attacked Jericho. Josiah instituted cultic reforms following the destruction of pagan worship centers and altars (621 B.C.). The reforms included the centralization of the feast, ensuring that the killing and eating of the Passover lamb took place in Jerusalem (2 Chron. 35:1-19), and the Passover was

Israel to come at the time of Passover, so during the Passover service, after the third cup of wine, the household's door was opened to signify the entry of Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah.

This Messianic longing reached a peak during the time of Christ, resulting in huge numbers of Jews attending Jerusalem for the Passover service, not only to participate in the feast itself, but to be present when the longed-for Messiah would reveal himself and overturn the Roman oppression. Rabbinic understanding of Micah 7:15<sup>16</sup> was that Israel's future redemption would be on Nisan 14, the day of Passover<sup>17</sup>. John 11:55-57's representation of the crowds asking whether Jesus would appear at the Passover or not reflects this Messianic expectation that increased to a fever-pitch during each Passover at Jerusalem.

Contemporary Passover thought therefore celebrated past redemption, and anticipated future redemption, preferably in the immediate present.

*Covenant relationship:* in the Exodus, God created a people for Himself – Israel. This self-understanding was vivid throughout Israel's history<sup>18</sup>, particularly as the Passover regulations defined who was in, and who was out, of the covenant relationship with God. The regulations for both the 'Egyptian' and subsequent 'Permanent' Passovers all defined

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held in the context of a renewing of the covenant relationship with God (2 Chron. 34:29-33). Solomon and Hezekiah both held Passovers (2 Chron. 8:13 & 30:15). Ezekiel wrote to the exiles with instructions for how the Passover was to be observed when the Temple was restored (Ez. 45:21), and Ezra led the returnees to Jerusalem in a Passover following their return from exile (Ez. 6:10-22).

<sup>15</sup> According to Edersheim in 'The Temple: its Ministry and Services as they were in the time of Christ', James Clark & Co. Ltd (1959), pp. 229-230, the Jews attributed key events in their history to Nisan 14, including among other events the collapse of the walls of Jericho, the fast held by Esther and the Jews in the Persian empire followed by the demise and execution of their persecutor (Haman), Gideon's destruction of the Midianites, Belshazzar's feast and God's intervention to bring down the Babylonian empire, paving the way for the return of the exiles, the destruction of Sodom and Lot's escape.

<sup>16</sup> This text forms part of a prophecy about Israel's restoration, 'As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt, show us marvelous things'.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, B. 'Jesus' Last Passover Meal', Mellen Biblical Press (1993), p. 50.

<sup>18</sup> Jeremiah says that, 'As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt' (Jer. 23:7), showing an understanding of Israel being the result of God's divine actions. The Jews kept texts describing the 'Egyptian' Passover and subsequent entry into the promised land in their phylacteries on their foreheads and left arms as a constant reminder during their morning prayers of what God had done for them, (Ex. 13:9,16, Deut. 6:9 and 11:20).

who could and could not participate<sup>19</sup>. Those who could participate were included in the covenant relationship, and those who did not participate were excluded from the covenant relationship.

Contemporary Judaism placed a high importance on food for a number of theological reasons<sup>20</sup>:

- a) God's power is manifested in His ability to provide food: to feed is to bless<sup>21</sup>.
- b) Through accepting or rejecting God's food one signified an acceptance or rejection of God Himself. It was through the medium of food that people expressed in an individual and daily manner their acceptance or otherwise of God and His sovereignty in their lives<sup>22</sup>.
- c) People question God's power and authority when they question His ability to feed them. It was expressly forbidden in the Torah to put God to the test<sup>23</sup>, which was what Israel did in the wilderness when they murmured against God<sup>24</sup>.
- d) God's food is His word. The Passover unleavened bread was intended as a sign that the law of the Lord 'may be on your lips'<sup>25</sup>, and the subsequent manna was

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<sup>19</sup> Exodus 12:19 and 12:43-49 include the regulations concerning who could and who could not participate. An alien could participate in the Passover provided he was circumcised, after which he would be considered no longer an alien, but a 'native of the land'. An Israelite by birth however would be excluded from the community of faith if he were to eat leavened bread during the subsequent Feast of Unleavened Bread, or if he were not to participate in the Passover itself, or the subsequent 'late' Passover held one month after the actual Passover at the temple for Israelites who were traveling during the time of the actual Passover.

<sup>20</sup> Feeley-Harnik, G. 'The Lord's Table: Eucharist and Passover in Early Christianity', University of Pennsylvania Press (1981), pp. 72-106. This analysis of the symbolism of food starts from an anthropological base, discussing the social importance and function of food within Judaism, and leads to a theological analysis of the importance of food within rabbinic Judaism from the post-exilic period onwards.

<sup>21</sup> Psalm 104:27-30, Gen. 3:17-18, Gen. 9:3-5, Psalm 23:5, and Isaiah 66:11-13 all include references to God's power to provide food for His creatures. God provided food for His people, and with each covenant specified what food could and could not be eaten, e.g. in Eden, after the flood, and at the Exodus

<sup>22</sup> The story of the Fall shows the role that food and choices about food plays in showing whether one accepts God's lordship in one's life or not. Obedience to God was expressed through obedience to His dietary regulations as outlined in the Torah. Psalm 78:27-32 shows God's judgment on Israel for longing for meat (quail) when He was providing manna for them. Hosea 3:1 uses the metaphor of the Lord loving the people of Israel, 'though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisin'. In this context Christ's obedience to the will of God in Gethsemane ('Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want', Mark 14:36) gains greater significance. Christ was using the metaphor of food and drink to express His total obedience to God and submission to His will.

<sup>23</sup> Deut. 6:16, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested Him at Massah'.

<sup>24</sup> Psalm 78:17-22 refers to the Israelites' murmurings in the wilderness as recorded in Exodus chs. 16 & 17, which brought subsequent judgment from God.

given that Israel understood that man lived only by ‘every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord’<sup>26</sup>.

- e) Eating God’s word binds the eater into a covenant relationship with God. Throughout the Old Testament, food and eating were powerful symbols of entering into a covenant relationship with God, most clearly expressed in Isaiah 55:1-3 and Exodus 24:9-12<sup>27</sup>.

It is within this context that the importance of food and eating together (commensalism) must be recognized. Contemporary Judaism was riven by sectarian divisions<sup>28</sup>, with one’s approach to food and eating being seen as an outward expression of one’s loyalty to a particular sect within Judaism. One was defined socially and religiously by what one ate, and with whom one ate, hence the charges against Jesus<sup>29</sup> were not that He was a glutton per se, but that in His gluttony was evidence of a person neither living in harmony with

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<sup>25</sup> Exodus 13:7-9 states that the unleavened bread was important so that ‘the teaching of the Lord may be on your lips; for with a strong hand the Lord brought you out of Egypt’. Deut. 8:3 refers to the importance of the manna, which was given ‘in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord’. Ezekiel (Ezekiel 2:8 – 3:3), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 15:16) and John the Evangelist (Revelation 10:8-11) were all instructed to eat God’s word as a form of food.

<sup>26</sup> Deut. 8:3.

<sup>27</sup> Eating together had enormous symbolic meaning in contemporary Judaism. When the covenant had been ratified at Sinai by the ‘blood of the covenant’, Moses, Aaron and the elders of Israel ascended Sinai and as they beheld God, they ‘ate and drank’ (Exodus 24:9-11). Isaiah 55 invites people to come and eat, and God will make a covenant with those who eat the food He provides. The shewbread in the tabernacle was to be placed before God always, and was to be placed there ‘on behalf of the people of Israel as a covenant forever’ (Leviticus 24:8). In Genesis 26:30, Isaac and Abimelech seal their covenant with a feast, with eating and drinking together. Eating the Passover meal together signified on an annual basis the renewal of the covenant between God and Israel, on the corporate and individual levels. Throughout the Old Testament, eating together signified social acceptance, inclusion, covenant making, agreement, and praise, whilst a refusal to eat together was a highly insulting action that severed links between people.

<sup>28</sup> According to Feeley-Harnik, there were many divisions in contemporary Judaism. This development started with the return from exile of Ezra, who instituted a non-sacrificial worship system based on the institution of the synagogue and the ceremonial reading of the Torah. This system meant that even the very poor could participate in local religious life, as the economic and temporal pressures of maintaining the cultic temple system were not present in the local synagogue. This local reading and interpretation of scriptures led inevitably to theological divisions in Judaism, as piety, knowledge of the Torah, interpretation and practice became bound up together. At the time of Christ there were many sects within Judaism, including the Pharisees, Herodians, Essenes, Zealots, Sadducees, Hasidim, Sicarii, Therapeutae and Nazarenes.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 11:18-19, ‘For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon”; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners”’.



the demands of the Torah not in a covenant relationship with God<sup>30</sup>. Christ's institution of the Lord's Supper as the commemorative act of His suffering and death instead of a non-food related rite or ritual gains new significance within this covenant relationship understanding of contemporary Judaism<sup>31</sup>.

Furthermore, the Passover was seen as a fulfillment of God's covenant promise to Abraham in Gen. 15:12-16. The Exodus put into effect the divine promise to Abraham<sup>32</sup>, and was seen as a guarantee of another divine promise, that of the Prophet who was yet to come<sup>33</sup>.

*Sacrifice*: the paschal lamb was understood to be a sacrifice. Exodus 12:27, 24:8, 34:25 and Deuteronomy 16:5-6 refer to it as a 'sacrifice'<sup>34</sup>. However, rabbinic debate raged as

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<sup>30</sup> Deut. 21:18-21 states, 'If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard." Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid'. Interestingly, the very next verses (Deut. 21:22-23) read, 'When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse'. This is explicitly referred to by Paul in Gal. 3:13 as being fulfilled by Christ, and by John implicitly in John 19:31.

<sup>31</sup> Christ's choice of persons to celebrate the Lord's Supper with Himself shows how the anti-typical paschal lamb broke with previous paschal tradition: His fellow celebrants included family and non-family members, a despised publican, a traitor, those who even at that stage doubted His essential identity, and those who still completely misunderstood His nature and role. The new covenant being instituted by Christ was not to depend on closely watched familial or national lines, but would be open to all classes of men based on their individual response and faith in the symbols being offered.

<sup>32</sup> Smith outlines in 'Jesus' Last Passover Meal' the contemporary Jewish understanding of the nature of the Passover in relation to the Abrahamic covenant. The rabbinic Midrash expounded on the nature of the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, claiming that the Exodus was conditional not only on God's promise, but on Israel's merit, which consisted of putting into practice the covenantal promises given to Abraham. Through the two meritorious deeds consisted of circumcision, and in keeping the paschal lamb for four days before it was slaughtered. Other rabbis saw Israel's failure to cast away idolatry as the reason why they were commanded to keep the paschal lamb for four days, but presumably the Israelites renounced idolatry when they kept the commands of the 'Egyptian' Passover.

<sup>33</sup> Deut. 18:15. This hope for the promised Prophet was held by both Jews and Samaritans, although the Samaritans had developed a 'revealer' theology in addition to the Jewish messianic theology around the expected Prophet. This Samaritan understanding of the 'revealer' is found in John 4 during the discussion between Jesus and the woman at the well near Samaria, in which she says, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us" '.

<sup>34</sup> In Exodus 34, the commands about the paschal lamb being a sacrifice are in the context of the renewing of the covenant between God and Israel, and in Exodus 24, the sacrifice which heralded the covenant was intended to atone for the sins of the people of Israel in order that they might enter into a covenantal relationship with God. The sacrifice was in effect the means authorized by God to cleanse Israel from their

to whether it was of a redemptive, expiatory, or thanksgiving nature<sup>35</sup>. The blood of the lamb and of the circumcision together were sometimes viewed as effecting the redemption from Egypt, and sometimes the blood was seen as meritorious as a result of the obedience shown in slaying the paschal lamb.

Only occasionally in rabbinic writings was the blood of the paschal lamb ipso facto viewed as the means for forgiveness for sins as an expiatory sacrifice. However, Zechariah 9:11 states, ‘....because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit’, and as this was understood within rabbinic Judaism as referring to both the Babylonian and Egyptian exiles, the blood of the paschal lamb was understood as equivalent to the blood of the covenant<sup>36</sup>.

Within this context, it is important to notice the rabbinic theology concerning Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac on Mt. Moriah in Genesis 22. The blood of the paschal lamb was viewed as being effective on the basis of Abraham’s willingness and obedience to sacrifice Isaac, and Isaac’s willingness and obedience to be sacrificed.

A theology developed in which the willingness to be offered, or the actual sacrifice, of an innocent individual, ipso facto, was viewed as expiatory<sup>37</sup>. Isaac’s willingness to be sacrificed, the location of the sacrifice on Mt. Moriah (the site of the future temple), and the time of Isaac’s sacrifice (allegedly on Nisan 14), were all viewed as significant in salvation-historical terms, linking Isaac’s sacrifice and God’s provision of a substitute

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sins. In Numbers 9:6-7 the Passover is presented as synonymous with ‘presenting the Lord’s offering’. The paschal lamb had all the characteristics of a sacrifice – without blemish, up to one year old, the blood was to be sprinkled (onto a lintel and subsequently onto the base of the temple altar), and its substitutionary nature is clearly outlined in Ex. 12:13, where God states that, ‘when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt’.

<sup>35</sup> This debate raged primarily because the paschal sacrifice was instituted before the formation of the covenant and subsequent receipt of the Mosaic law at Mt. Sinai. The paschal sacrifice was conducted by non-priest, by the heads of households, away from the tabernacle, and were not originally viewed as being expiatory, more as being in remembrance and celebration of God’s acts of deliverance, as according to the explanation of the rite in Exodus 12:25-27. By the time of Christ however, the priests had taken to themselves the right to have all the paschal lambs slain in the temple grounds, and the sacrifice had come to be understood in more explicitly expiatory terms.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, B. ‘Jesus’ Last Passover Meal’, Mellen Biblical Press (1993), p. 44.

<sup>37</sup> Smith, B. ‘Jesus’ Last Passover Meal’, Mellen Biblical Press (1993), p. 48.

explicitly in Judaic thinking with the sacrifice of the paschal lamb at Passover in the temple on Nisan 14.

*Eschatology*: the Jews of Christ's time focused intently on their expected deliverance from the Romans, a deliverance expected to occur on Nisan 14. This immediate hope overshadowed, but did not eclipse, a hope in a final messianic feast when all the generations of Israel would be redeemed by God<sup>38</sup>.

The evidence for this hope in a future messianic deliverance is not as extensive as that of an immediate temporal deliverer from Roman oppression, but Jesus Himself, as a Jew, shared in this future hope. Luke 22:16 and Mark 14:25 refer to a future Passover celebrated in the 'Kingdom of God', and it is possible that Jesus was referring to the Jewish hope of a future messianic banquet in Luke 13:22-30 and Luke 14:15-24.

In summary, there was a complex understanding of Passover and Passover symbolism in 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. Judaism. In terms of redemption, Passover signified a celebration of past redemption by God, a hope for an immediate temporal redemption from Rome: in terms of covenant, Passover signified the establishment of a covenant relationship between God and Israel, and incorporation for individuals within the covenant people of God through participation in the Passover meal; in terms of sacrifice, Passover signified forgiveness for sins through the expiatory and vicarious sacrifice of a willing and righteous individual based on Isaac's willing obedience to God's commands; and in terms of eschatology, Passover signified an affirmation of faith in God to act redemptively on behalf of all Israelites of all generations at some great messianic feast in the future.

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<sup>38</sup> A poem, believed to go back to Christ's time, expresses this Jewish hope well (it is outlined by both Smith, B. in 'Jesus' Last Passover Meal', Mellen Biblical Press (1993), p. 49 and by Marshall, I. In 'Last Supper and Lord's Supper', The Paternoster Press (1980), p. 78. The poem talks about four Passover nights in Israel's history: the first Passover night was the creation of the world; the second Passover night was the night God revealed Himself to Abraham; the third Passover night was the Exodus from Egypt; and the fourth Passover night was yet in the future, when 'This is the night of the Passover to the name of the Lord: it is a night reserved and set aside for the redemption of all the generations of Israel'. The exact dating of this poem is unknown, but it expresses well the Jewish belief in a future messianic redemption that would encompass all true Israelites at a future messianic gathering. Jewish understanding of the future messianic feast centered around texts such as Isaiah 25:6-8, when Yahweh will provide a bountiful feast, 'for all peoples'.

John utilizes these contemporary Passover understandings to portray the death of Christ within a Passover paradigm, and develops a further theological significance on the given theological foundation. The question to address here is, ‘what was the further theological significance that John was demonstrating in his portrayal of Christ dying at the time the paschal lambs were being slain?’

### **Johannine Passover Understanding.**

Two motifs within John can be combined to provide a deeper understanding of the then current Passover themes of redemption, sacrifice, covenant and eschatology: Christ as ‘Lamb of God’ and as ‘Suffering Servant’:

*Christ as ‘Lamb of God’:* John the Baptist’s designation of Christ as the ‘Lamb of God’<sup>39</sup> can be understood from an apocalyptic eschatological perspective. The Baptist’s apocalyptic preaching in the Synoptics has a strong eschatological emphasis, with the One who is to come executing judgment with fire and axe<sup>40</sup>. This eschatological interpretation is consistent with the Johannine parallelism in 1 John 3:5, 8, where the concepts of taking away sin and destroying the devil’s works are used synonymously, and with Johannine thought elsewhere in Revelation 7:17 and 17:14, where the apocalyptic ‘Lamb of God’ appears<sup>41</sup>. The Johannine Baptist’s eschatological understanding therefore portrays the Lamb as the One who will destroy sin and overcome Satan and his works.

A further Johannine eschatological understanding of the ‘Lamb of God’ appears in Revelation 5:9-10, 19:9, 21:1-3, 9: the messianic marriage feast in heaven, so anticipated within Judaism, is now open to people from all nations, not just Jews. As those who fed on the ‘Egyptian’ paschal lamb became part of physical Israel, so the personal and continual feeding on the body of the anti-typical paschal lamb incorporates the believer into a new messianic reality, into spiritual Israel, and thereby into the hope of participation in the great messianic wedding feast of the Lamb and His bride.

In addition to the Baptist’s eschatological understanding of the ‘Lamb of God’<sup>42</sup>, the table below shows the sacrificial paschal lamb aspects in John 18 & 19:

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<sup>39</sup> John 1:29, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’, and John 1:36, ‘...and as he watched Jesus walk by he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God” ’.

<sup>40</sup> C.f. Luke 3:7-9, Matthew 3:7-12 contain vivid images of the judgment brought by the One who is to come, including using an axe to destroy all trees which do not bring forth good fruit, and using a winnowing tool to sift the chaff from the grain, resulting in the chaff being destroyed by fire.

<sup>41</sup> In Revelation 7:17, the ‘Lamb’ is the leader of the saved righteous from all nations, whilst in Revelation 17:14, the ‘Lamb’ is portrayed as waging a victorious war on the evil powers of this earth and the ‘Beast’, i.e. Satan.

<sup>42</sup> Brown (‘The Gospel According to John I-XII’, pp. 58-63) argues that the Baptist may well have had an eschatological understanding of the ‘Lamb of God’ given the context of the Baptist’s preaching in the

Text	Passover Linkage
John 18:28	Explicit timing linkage between Christ's trial and Nisan 14 (the day when the paschal lambs were slain).
John 18:39	Explicit timing linkage between Christ's trial and Nisan 14.
John 19:4	Pilate's admission of Jesus' innocence mirrors the perfection required in a paschal lamb <sup>43</sup> .
John 19:14	Explicit timing linkage between Christ's verdict being pronounced and midday on Nisan 14 (when the slaughter of the paschal lambs in the temple began).
John 19:24	Christ's robe was seamless, as was the High Priest's robe that was used whenever the High Priest ministered before God <sup>44</sup> .
John 19:29	The offering to Christ of a sponge of wine on a branch of hyssop fulfills the type of hyssop sprinkling blood in Exodus 12:22.
John 19:36	None of Christ's bones were broken, fulfilling the paschal type of Exodus 12:46 and Numbers 9:12.

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Synoptics. Grisgby however argues strongly in 'The Cross as an Expiatory Sacrifice in the Fourth Gospel', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 15 (1982), pp 58-67, that we should understand Christ's death in terms of an expiatory paschal sacrifice. There was in contemporary Judaism a strong idea of a lamb who would bring judgment upon the earth and destroy all evil, particularly in the Testament of Joseph 19:8 and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs.

<sup>43</sup> According to Deut. 15:21, only an animal without defect could be used as a sacrifice, and according to Exodus 12:5, 'Your lamb shall be without blemish'. The perfection of the paschal lamb was non-negotiable in both the 'Egyptian' and 'Permanent' Passovers. The innocence of Christ was well established amongst believers in Christ at the time of the writing of John. Hebrews 4:15 says that although Christ was tempted in all points as we are, 'yet he was without sin', and 1 Peter 1:19 describes Christ as 'a lamb without defect or blemish'. However, in John 19:4 we have an admission from the highest judicial authority within Israel of the time of the forensic innocence of Christ.

<sup>44</sup> In Exodus 28:31-35 the regulations for the High Priest's robe are outlined. The lack of such a seamless garment in the sacrificial sanctuary service resulted in death for the High Priest. Christ, the anti-typical paschal sacrifice, dies when his seamless robe is removed and he is crucified. John 19:24 may also allude to Psalm 22:18, an imprecatory Psalm linked closely with Christ's suffering through its opening verse, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'.

The Johannine Christ is in control of His own destiny. John portrays Christ as being in control of events, determining when to act or otherwise, so Christ's crucifixion at the time of the slaying of the paschal lamb must be seen within Johannine thought as a deliberate statement of self-understanding on Christ's part<sup>45</sup>, stating his role as the anti-typical paschal lamb<sup>46</sup>.

This sacrificial understanding would have been understood by those of John's readers from a Jewish background as being expiatory and vicarious<sup>47</sup>, particularly those with a Pauline understanding of Christ's death ('For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed'<sup>48</sup>), and those with a Petrine understanding ('You know that you were ransomed...with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish'<sup>49</sup>).

The 'bread of life' discourse in John 6 makes strongest sense within this Passover framework<sup>50</sup>. Set near Passover, during the discourse Christ makes shocking use of

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<sup>45</sup> The Johannine Christ is in control of His own destiny. John 12:7, 23, 13:3, 11, 18, 18:14, and 19:28 portray Christ as determining of Himself when He will act, and what He will do when He acts. He is not subject to another person's agenda or timetable, hence the death of Christ at the time of the slaying of the paschal lamb must be understood as a self-designation by Christ as Himself as the anti-typical paschal lamb.

<sup>46</sup> This Johannine understanding is supported in Revelation 5:6, where John sees a Lamb, 'standing as if it had been slaughtered', and in 5:9, which says of the Lamb that, 'you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation', a reference to the ransoming nature of the original paschal lamb by whose blood the people of Israel were saved and redeemed from sin.

<sup>47</sup> This understanding for Christians from a background in Judaism of Christ's sacrifice as being vicarious and expiatory would be based on their understanding of the Abraham and Isaac sacrifice on Mount Moriah, where an innocent victim was willing to be sacrificed, in whose place God provided a substitutionary sacrifice. As stated above, the willingness of an innocent individual to be sacrificed vicariously was viewed within contemporary Judaism as being of an expiatory nature.

<sup>48</sup> 1 Cor. 5:7. Here Paul refers to the community of faith for which Christ was sacrificed as the paschal lamb as the 'unleavened dough'. To be 'in Christ', a key Pauline theological concept, means that the believer is already living within a fulfilled Passover, i.e. saved from sin by the grace of God, and now living in a new covenant relationship with God through the blood of Christ.

<sup>49</sup> 1 Peter 1:18-19. Peter refers to the believers as being redeemed by the 'precious blood of Christ', their 'lamb without blemish or defect', who are therefore to live their Christian lives with dignity, endurance and in holiness.

<sup>50</sup> This paper is not the place for a detailed exegesis of John 6. Suffice it to say that most scholars recognize the clear link with the paschal lamb symbolism of John 18 & 19, with Jesus' sayings being viewed as being John's commentary and theological statement that links to the Last Supper and eucharistic sayings that are portrayed in Matthew, Mark, Luke and 1 Corinthians in greater detail.

explicit sacrificial terminology<sup>51</sup> in a way that can only be understood within a paschal context. His statements about the ‘bread that came down from heaven’<sup>52</sup> would have been understood as a self-designation as the anti-typical manna of the Exodus. In effect, He was declaring His own self-sacrifice as the anti-typical paschal lamb to be the all-sufficient sacrifice for redemption from sin (‘that takes away the sin of the world’<sup>53</sup>), bringing eternal rather than temporal forgiveness for sin.

The command to eat of Christ’s flesh and drink of His blood<sup>54</sup>, within the Passover context, points clearly to a covenant meal, but which covenant? The answer to this question is clearer when we consider the next motif, of Christ as ‘Suffering Servant’.

*Christ as Suffering Servant*<sup>55</sup>: John links Christ clearly with the Suffering Servant of Deutero-Isaiah: John 12:38 states that Christ fulfilled Isaiah 53:1; John 1:32-34 identifies Christ as being God’s ‘chosen one’ upon whom the ‘Spirit’ has descended, a fulfillment of Isaiah 42:1, the first of the Suffering Servant prophecies, which were well understood in the apostolic church as referring to Christ<sup>56</sup>.

A central feature of the Suffering Servant is that he suffers: he would be slain as an expiatory sacrifice, innocently on behalf of others<sup>57</sup>. Although within contemporary Judaism the idea that the Messiah would suffer was almost anathema<sup>58</sup>, Christ exhibited a

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<sup>51</sup> Christ’s use of words in John 6:54-58 such as ‘flesh’ and ‘blood’ was deliberate and shocking to the Jews of His time. It was not only sacrificial, but the eating of human flesh and blood was expressly forbidden.

<sup>52</sup> John 6:58.

<sup>53</sup> John 1:29.

<sup>54</sup> John 6:52-58.

<sup>55</sup> The ‘Suffering Servant’ passages are Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12. There is much debate as to whether these passages refer to a corporate or an individual personality, and my assumption in this paper is that they primarily refer to an individual personality and were fulfilled by Jesus Christ. It should be noted that it is quite possible within Semitic thought for seemingly dichotomous realities to be incorporated within a single entity, for opposites to remain in tension with each other, hence it is quite possible for both an individual and collective personality to be represented within these texts.

<sup>56</sup> For instance, Acts 8:32 applies Isaiah 53:7 to Christ, Matthew 8:17 applies Isaiah 53:4 to Christ, and Hebrews 9:28 applies Isaiah 53:12 to Christ, and in Luke 22:37 Christ applies Isaiah 53 directly to Himself.

<sup>57</sup> Isaiah 52:13-15, Isaiah 53:1-12.

<sup>58</sup> Cullman (‘The Christology of the New Testament: Study Edition’, SCM Press Ltd (1963), pp. 55-60) shows how foreign the idea of a suffering Messiah was within rabbinic Judaism. Targums on Isaiah 53 did recognize the vicarious and substitutionary nature of the suffering portrayed, but could not make the connection with the Messiah, preferring to view person portrayed either as a Teacher of Righteousness, or as Israel, suffering vicariously for the sins of the entire world.



strong sense that He was going to suffer and die vicariously throughout His ministry<sup>59</sup>. This self-awareness was affirmed, if not initiated, during Christ's baptism. John 1:29 may be viewed as John's commentary on Christ's baptism, at which John, through the prophecies of Deutero-Isaiah, concludes that Christ took upon Himself the role of the Suffering Servant<sup>60</sup>.

This Johannine self-awareness of being the Suffering Servant was very strong, and climaxed in the eucharistic sayings<sup>61</sup> of the Lord's Supper, in John 6's 'bread of life' discourse, John 10:11 ('I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep') and John 10:17 ('For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again')<sup>62</sup>.

According to Isaiah 42:6 and 49:8, a parallel feature of the Suffering Servant is that his innocent and vicarious suffering has a purpose - to re-establish a new covenant relationship between God and His people. In fulfillment of this covenant purpose, the eucharistic sayings of Christ all contain the words 'for many / for you', substitutionary concepts that reflect the role of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53, and they all include the word 'covenant', which is, based on Christ's own eucharistic words and self-understanding, the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34. Despite the best efforts of critical scholars trying to identify the 'original' eucharistic words of Christ, these two concepts of substitutionary death and covenant-making stubbornly remain, being common to all the recorded eucharistic sayings.

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<sup>59</sup> Cullman (op. cit.) refers to scholars of a more liberal school who, based on an *a priori* position, prefer to see Christ's self-consciousness as being primarily about being a preacher of the Kingdom of God. All of the sayings throughout the gospels which reveal an awareness of the need to die and be raised again, the 'ransom saying', and the eucharistic sayings in the Lord's Supper etc. are viewed as being 'vaticinia ex eventu', invented by the early apostolic church and attributed to Christ retroactively in order to promote the Christology of the Suffering Servant and atoning death of Christ that is viewed as being primarily a Pauline invention.

<sup>60</sup> This argument is made strongly by Cullman (op. cit.), and is based partly on an analysis of how Christ viewed His baptism, as an act that foretold and foreshadowed His own death for the sins of all mankind. Mark 1:11, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased' is a direct quotation from Isaiah 42:1, the call of the Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah.

<sup>61</sup> Matthew 26:28, Mark 14:24, Luke 22:20 and 1 Cor. 11:24 contain the key eucharistic sayings.

<sup>62</sup> For instance, Mark 2:20, Luke 13:31, Luke 12:50, Mark 10:38, Matthew 12:39, Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:33, Mark 12:1-9 etc.

The Johannine Christ does not state these eucharistic words found elsewhere<sup>63</sup>, but in John 6 provides the means by which believers can be incorporated within this new covenant, through feeding on the body and blood of Christ.

The dual ideas of substitutionary representation and re-establishing a new covenant are central to both the eucharistic and 'bread of life' sayings of Christ, and to the Suffering Servant prophecies, and form a theological nucleus for understanding the parallel 'Lamb of God' motif.

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<sup>63</sup> C.f. footnote # 60 above for the key eucharistic saying texts.

## **Conclusion.**

Much modern scholarship has focused on the ‘problem’ presented by the difficulty in reconciling the Passion Week chronologies. This attempt has generated considerable scholarly effort, yet as with the quest for the ‘historical Jesus’, will probably remain an inconclusive quest for two key reasons: the lack of historical data per se; and the theological rather than historical purpose of the gospel writers, particularly John<sup>64</sup>.

John 18 & 19 present Christ’s death theologically as the anti-typical paschal lamb. Through the twin motifs of Lamb of God and Suffering Servant, John deepens the existing paschal understandings through focusing on the covenant-making, vicarious, expiatory and eschatological aspects of Christ’s death.

In redemptive terms, Christ’s anti-typical death redeems, not just physical Israel from temporal Roman oppression, but the entire human race from the eternal tyranny and degradation of sin.

In covenantal terms, Christ’s death and the believers’ subsequent feeding on His body and blood are the means by which God establishes a new covenant with believers. This new covenant defines a new Israel, a new covenant people, that is not based on ethnic grounds, but simply on a believer’s faith as evidenced by his or her feeding on Christ’s body in the covenant meal.

In sacrificial terms, Christ’s death is anti-typical. Paschal lambs need no longer be slain for individual Israelite households. Christ’s innocent, vicarious and expiatory sacrifice is cosmic in scope - sufficient for all people of all times.

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<sup>64</sup> John 20:30-31 outlines John’s explicitly theological and apologetic purpose for writing his gospel. The account is not to be viewed primarily as an historical document, but presents incidents and sayings from the life of Jesus of Nazareth to encourage the belief that this Galilean carpenter is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief the believer can receive eternal life.

In eschatological terms, Christ's death broadens the existing understanding: God will act redemptively in the future to save not just literal Israel, but 'saints from every tribe and language and people and nation', and thereby inaugurate a cosmic messianic feast.

It is because Christ's death is such that John can write 'but these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name'<sup>65</sup>.

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<sup>65</sup> John 20:31.

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