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The Jewish Roots of the Mass

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Introduction

One of the most common questions asked during liturgical and sacramental catechesis is this: “Why do Catholics do that?” In other words, what are the roots of Catholic liturgical worship? What are the roots of the sacraments? Where does Catholic worship come from, and what light might its origins shine on its present day meaning?

One of the most fascinating ways of answering such questions is to reach back to the *biblical* foundations of the Mass. In fact, to properly understand the eucharistic faith and practice of Christianity, one has to go back not only to the New Testament, but also to the Old Testament and ancient Jewish practice and belief. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, “A better knowledge of the Jewish people’s faith and religious life as professed and lived even now can help our better understanding of certain aspects of Christian liturgy” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 2nd ed. [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000], no. 1096). This is true because the history of salvation—not only of Christ and the Church, but also of the Church’s liturgy and “sacramental economy”—is “prefigured in *the Old Covenant*” (CCC, no. 1093). In other words, to

understand “Christian liturgy,” we must first understand “Jewish liturgy” (CCC, no. 1096).

In this article, we will take a brief tour of ancient Jewish practices and beliefs that lie at the roots of the present-day Catholic Mass. Although there are many parallels between ancient Jewish liturgy and the Mass, for our purposes here, we will focus on just two: the Jewish Passover and the Jewish hope for the new manna of the Messiah. Both these aspects of ancient Jewish practice and belief can shed light on Catholic eucharistic practice and belief, revealing that there is much more in common between ancient Judaism and present-day Catholicism than there might seem at first glance.

The New Passover

To understand the connections between the Jewish Passover and the Catholic Mass, it is important to distinguish between the Passover in Jewish Scripture (what Christians call the Old Testament) and in ancient Jewish Tradition.

In the Old Testament, the biblical Passover is described in great detail in Exodus 12. Here, we find that the feast of Passover (Hebrew *pesah*; Greek *pascha*) originates in the famous story of the final plague against Egypt at the time of Moses when God slew all

firstborn Egyptian males. To deliver the people of God from slavery, God sends the destroying angel to put to death the firstborn sons of any family that does not perform the solemn ritual of the Passover sacrifice. This Passover ritual consists of several key steps: (1) sacrifice a year-old unblemished male lamb, (2) dip a branch of hyssop in the blood of the lamb, (3) spread the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and lintels of the home as a sign, and (4) eat the lamb (Ex 12:1-14). It is important to emphasize here the fourth step: In the Old Testament, the Passover ritual is not completed by the death of the sacrificial lamb. It is completed when the Israelites *eat the "flesh"* of the lamb that is slain so that they might be delivered from bondage in Egypt and, ultimately, from death (Ex 12:8). Moreover, once the sacrifice is completed, God commands that the Passover be celebrated every year in the spring "as a memorial" of the deliverance won for the people of God (Ex 12:14).

In ancient Jewish tradition, the biblical Passover developed and underwent certain changes and additions. For one thing, the eating of the Passover lamb and unleavened bread was accompanied by the drinking of multiple cups of wine; four, to be exact. The collection of ancient Jewish traditions known as the Mishnah records some of these developments (see Mishnah, *Pesahim* [Passover] 10). As part of the celebration of the Passover meal, the father of the household would say the following blessings over the Passover bread and wine (see Mishnah, *Berakoth* [Blessings] 6:1): "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, who brings forth bread

from the earth." "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the vine."

Anyone familiar with the blessings over the bread and wine at Mass will immediately see how these ancient Jewish blessings are almost identical to what the priest says in Mass today (compare the Offertory). This is particularly significant if, as seems likely, these ancient Jewish blessings are the ones that Jesus himself spoke at the Last Supper when he took the bread, "blessed" it, and gave it to the disciples (Mt 26:26; Mk 14:22).

In addition to this connection, Jewish tradition also mandated that during the Passover meal the son would ask the father of the family a question: "Why is this night different from other nights?" To this, the father would respond: "This is because of what the LORD did for *me* when *I* came out of Egypt" (Ex 13:8; emphasis added). In other words, Jewish tradition saw the Passover sacrifice and the Passover meal as making them spiritual participants in the *first* Passover night, no matter how many centuries had passed since the original Exodus. God's original act of deliverance was somehow made present through the Passover liturgy.

With Jewish Scripture and tradition in mind, we can see clearly how it is that the first Christians—who were Jewish Christians—understood the Last Supper and the Christian Eucharist. Above all, they recognized that the Eucharist was the *new Passover*, in which Jesus had replaced the flesh and blood of the old Passover lamb with his own flesh and blood. Like the old Passover, which is celebrated as "a memorial feast" (Ex 12:14), Jesus says

to his disciples, “Do this in remembrance [Greek *anamnesin*] of me” (1 Cor 11:24). Christians of every century participate in this one new Passover, which is re-presented at every single Mass. As the *Catechism* teaches, “When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ’s Passover, and it is made present: the sacrifice Christ offered once for all on the cross remains ever present” (CCC, no. 1364). That is why St. Paul, himself an expert in Jewish Scripture, can write, “Our paschal lamb [Greek *pascha*] Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast” (1 Cor 5:7-8). The feast Paul is referring to here is, of course, the Christian Eucharist, the new Passover feast, which, like the Jewish Passover itself, is both a sacrifice and a meal.

Finally, this link with Passover also explains the early Christian belief in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. As any first-century Jew would have known, to complete the Passover ritual, *you have to eat the flesh of the lamb*. The new Passover, like the old, was not completed by the death of the lamb; it was completed by “eating the flesh” (Ex 12:8). Even so today, just before Communion, the Catholic priest proclaims to the people of God, “Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the Supper of the Lamb” (Communion Rite). In the new Supper of the Lamb, Christ is indeed the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (Jn 1:29).

The New Manna from Heaven

The second important feature of Jewish Scripture and tradition was the

ancient hope for new manna from heaven. The Jewish manna tradition is an important key to understanding the Eucharist both in the New Testament and the present-day Mass.

In the Old Testament, the manna is first described in Exodus 16. In the desert, the twelve tribes of Israel cry out for food, and God responds by saying, “I will now rain down bread from heaven for you” (Ex 16:4). Significantly, this is a twofold gift: each morning, God gives Israel “*bread*” from heaven (the manna); each evening, God gives them “*flesh*” from heaven (the quail). According to Exodus, the manna appears in the morning, “when the dew evaporated” (Ex 16:14), and tastes “like wafers made with honey” (Ex 16:31). Evidently, the reason the manna takes like honey is because the manna is a foretaste of the promised land, the land “flowing with milk and honey” (Ex 3:8). It is thus a pledge of the Israelites’ ultimate destination. Although they are currently in the desert, God pledges to bring them home and gives them the manna as a sign of the promise. Moreover, the Israelites recognize that the manna is no ordinary bread. They refer to it as the “bread from heaven” (Ps 78:21-25), and they treat it as holy, placing it in a golden urn and putting it in the Ark of the Covenant inside the Tabernacle (Ex 16:33; Heb 9:2-4). According to the Old Testament, God gives to the Israelites the manna from heaven for forty years, until they finally arrive in the promised land of Canaan. At that time, the manna ceases (see Jos 5).

In later Jewish tradition, however, a belief arose that when the Messiah finally came, he would bring back the miracle of the manna. For example, the

ancient Jewish writing known as *2 Baruch* (AD first century) says that when “the Messiah” comes, “it will happen at that time that the treasury of manna will come down again from on high” and that the righteous will eat this manna every day (*2 Baruch* 29:3-8, James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* [2 Volumes; New York: Doubleday, 1983-85], Vol. 1, pp. 621-52). From this ancient Jewish perspective, those blessed enough to live in “the days of the Messiah” would once again eat the manna of the Messiah, who is sometimes depicted as a new Moses.

In the Gospels, Jesus speaks of this Jewish hope for the new manna of the Messiah and connects it to the Eucharist on at least two occasions.

First, in the Lord’s Prayer, he teaches his disciples to pray “give us today our daily bread” (Mt 6:11). In the original Greek, the word translated “daily” (“*epiousios*”) here actually means “supersubstantial” or “supernatural,” as Jerome translated it in the Latin Vulgate Bible. On the one hand, this petition in the Lord’s Prayer can be applied to daily needs: the bread needed for existence each day. In its original historical context, however, any Jewish Christian would have recognized a prayer for bread that is both *daily* and *supernatural* as a prayer for the new manna, the new manna of the Messiah. As the *Catechism* teaches, when “taken literally,” this petition of the Lord’s Prayer “refers directly to the Bread of Life, the Body of Christ” (CCC, no. 2837).

The second example of Jesus mentioning the manna is from the famous Bread of Life discourse, which he preaches in the Jewish synagogue at Capernaum (see Jn 6:25-71). In this

discourse, Jesus’ Jewish audience challenges him to perform a sign like that of Moses, who gave the fathers “manna in the desert” (Jn 6:30-33). Jesus responds with a discourse on the Eucharist, in which he identifies the Eucharist as the true manna from heaven: “Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die. . . . And the bread that I will give *is my flesh* for the life of the world” (Jn 6:49-51; emphasis added).

In light of such teachings, again, it is no wonder that the first Jewish Christians believed in the real presence of Jesus in the Christian Eucharist. For when they read the Scriptures, they saw it in terms of “Old Testament prefigurations” of what God had accomplished “in the fullness of time in the person of his incarnate Son” (CCC, no. 128). From a Jewish Christian perspective, if the old manna was miraculous bread from heaven, the bread of angels, then the new manna of the Eucharist could not be just a symbol. If it were, that would make the old manna greater than the new. To the contrary, Jesus describes the Eucharist as the new and greater manna from heaven: “For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink . . . *This is the bread that came down from heaven*. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever” (Jn 6:55, 58; emphasis added). With these words, Jesus is revealing his real presence in the Eucharist, but in a very *Jewish* way, by showing it to be the long-awaited new manna of the Messiah, and, therefore, miraculous bread from heaven.

In the Catholic Mass, we find a subtle but beautiful allusion to the Eucharist as the new manna in the epiclesis of Eucharistic Prayer II, when the priest says, “Make holy therefore these gifts, we pray, / by sending down your Spirit upon them *like the dewfall*, / So that they may become for us, / The Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In the words “like the dewfall,” there is a biblical allusion to the manna of the Exodus, which comes down from heaven each day with the morning “dew” (Ex 16:13-14). Given the Church’s custom of offering the Mass daily, and not just weekly, this is an important point. Just as the old manna is a daily gift from God, so too the Church encourages the faithful to receive the new manna “even daily” (CCC, no. 1389).

In conclusion, the book of Exodus goes on to say of the manna, “On seeing it, the Israelites asked one another, ‘What is this?’” (Ex 16:15). From a spiritual perspective, this is a revealing sentence. In Hebrew, the word “manna” comes from the phrase meaning, “What

is it?” (“*man hu*”). From that day to this, the question of the Israelites echoes down through the ages: What is it? What is this bread? In the light of Christ crucified and risen, the Catholic faith teaches that it is the true bread from heaven—the Body and Blood of Christ—which the Church gives to her children each day in the Mass, as she journeys toward the heavenly promised land of the pilgrim people of God.

Further Reading

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