

Wednesday July 15th: The Death of Jesus as Sacrifice

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As we saw in the first session, animal sacrifice was a central element of worship in both the Greek and the Jewish traditions. Although there were numerous differences in the two traditions, there were enough similarities that the practice of animal sacrifice would have been a common point of reference for all recipients of the early Christian message, Jew and gentile alike. What is distinctive about the early Christian tradition is the way that early Christian thinkers reinterpreted this traditional practice as a way of understanding the significance of Jesus' death. In this session we will discuss some of the key texts that document that development.

Christ our Passover

The earliest explicit reference we have to Jesus as a sacrifice is in Paul's first letter to the Christian community in Corinth, which dates probably to the early 50s or perhaps late 40s AD. Paul's statement here has become such a familiar part of the liturgy that we need to look at it carefully in its original context. What precisely does Paul say, and in what context? Paul is in effect using metaphorical language here, drawing on the Jewish festival of Passover. ('Paschal' is an adjective derived from the Greek word *pascha*, the Greek version of the Hebrew word *pesach*, 'Passover'.) What larger point is Paul making here?

Paul, 1 Corinthians 5.6-8
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(6) Your boasting is not a good thing. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens all of the dough? (7) Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch of dough, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. (8) Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

To understand fully Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians, we need to know something about Passover. The account of its origin is found in Exodus.

Exodus 12.1-20
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(1) The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, (2) "This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. (3) Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. (4) If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. (5) Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. (6) You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. (7) They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the

lintel of the houses in which they eat it. (8) They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. (9) Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. (10) You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn with fire. (11) This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand, and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the Lord. (12) I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human to animal, and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. (13) The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

(14) “This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance. (15) Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread; on the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day shall be cut off from Israel. (16) On the first day you shall hold a solemn assembly and on the seventh day a solemn assembly; no work shall be done on those days; only what everyone must eat, that alone may be prepared by you. (17) You shall observe the Festival of Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought your companies out of the land of Egypt: you shall observe this day throughout your generations as a perpetual ordinance. (18) In the first month, from the evening of the fourteenth day until the evening of the twenty-first day, you shall eat unleavened bread. (19) For seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses, for whoever eats what is leavened shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether an alien or a native of the land. (20) You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your settlements you shall eat unleavened bread.”

The Last Supper and the Institution of the Eucharist

It's likely that Paul referred to Christ as a paschal lamb because of a pre-existing tradition that the Last Supper, with the institution of the Eucharist, took place at the Passover feast. Paul was familiar with that story, as we know from his account of it at I Corinthians 11.23-26, although he does not explicitly say that it took place at Passover. The Synoptic tradition, however, is very clear about the setting, as we can see in the account in Mark. (The Gospel of John, in contrast, sets the Last Supper on the night preceding the start of Passover, and accordingly has no account of the institution of the Eucharist; see John 13.)

As you read the passage from Mark, think about the way that it does (and doesn't) make a connection between Jesus and the Passover lamb. As we know from the account in Exodus, the Passover lamb was traditionally the central element in the Passover feast, and as such Mark explicitly mentions it at the start of his account. But after that it disappears from the narrative. Why?

Mark 14.12–25

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(12) On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, “Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?” (13) So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, (14) and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ (15) He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.” (16) So the disciples set out and went to the city and found everything as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover meal.

(17) When it was evening, he came with the twelve. (18) And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.” (19) They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, “Surely, not I?” (20) He said to them, “It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. (21) For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.”

(22) While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” (23) Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. (24) He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. (25) Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

Christ’s Death as the Perfect Sacrifice

The most thorough and elaborate interpretation of Jesus’ death as a sacrifice is in the anonymous Letter to the Hebrews, which dates probably to the 80s AD. Among other things, the author argues for the significance of Jesus’ life and death by using the ancient worship service of the Jerusalem Temple as his point of reference. He makes the case that Christ is the great High Priest (4.14-5.10 and 7.1-28) and the mediator of a new and better covenant (8.1-23), and then continues by arguing that Christ is also the perfect sacrifice.

As you read the following passage, think about the way the author constructs his argument. How does he interpret Christ’s death as a sacrifice? What is its purpose? What are its implications for the traditional animal sacrifices that were offered in the Jerusalem Temple?

Hebrews 9.1-10.4 (selections)

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(9.1) Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. (2) For a tent was constructed, the first one, in which were the lampstand, the table, and the bread

of the Presence; this is called the holy place. (3) Behind the second curtain was a tent called the holy of holies. (4) In it stood the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which there were a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; (5) above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. (5) Of these things we cannot speak now in detail.

(6) These preparations having thus been made, the priests go continually into the first tent to carry out their ritual duties, (7) but only the high priest goes into the second, and he but once a year and not without taking the blood that he offers for himself and for the sins committed unintentionally by the people. (8) By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary has not yet been disclosed as long as the first tent is still standing. (9) This is a symbol of the present time, indicating that gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper (10) but deal only with food and drink and various baptisms, regulations for the body imposed until the time comes to set things right.

(11) But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), (12) he entered once for all into the holy place, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. (13) For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, (14) how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! . . .

(23) Thus it was necessary for the sketches of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves need better sacrifices than these. (24) For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. (25) Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the holy place year after year with blood that is not his own, (26) for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. (27) And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once and after that the judgment, (28) so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

(10.1) Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach. (2) Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshipers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin? (3) But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year. (4) For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.