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## Connections Between Christian Communion and the Jewish Seder

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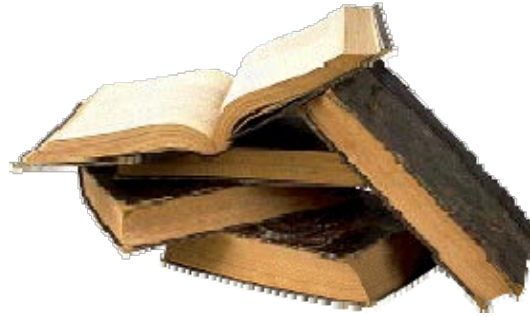
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# Connections Between Christian Communion and the Jewish Seder

## **Abstract**

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"For many years, I have been trying to find a religious faith that was right for me. During these past few years I have found Christianity to be the faith that was right for myself but did not have a full understanding as to why I felt this way. By attending the State Street United Methodist Church in Fulton, NY, I was given the opportunity to learn more about the Christian faith and the ceremonies that accompanied it. At the church, Communion ceremonies were held on the first Sunday of each month and for religious holidays. Over time, I learned that Communion ceremonies are a very large component of the Christian faith and wanted to learn more about them; hence why I chose this topic. I also wanted to compare Communion ceremonies to ceremonies in another religious faith in order to have a better understanding as to why they are practiced. Through researching the Communion ceremony I found a ceremony in the Jewish faith to be very similar, the Passover Seder. In fact, Communion is not only similar to the Passover Seder but is directly connected to that ceremony in several ways. To get the research I needed to understand the Passover Seder and Communion, I have consulted sources from various colleges, from my hometown, internet databases and conversed to other people who have had experiences with these ceremonies in the past."



## Research Papers



*+++Prize awarded by the REST Club*

## **Connections Between Christian Communion and the Jewish Seder**

### **Introduction**

For many years, I have been trying to find a religious faith that was right for me. During these past few years I have found Christianity to be the faith that was right for myself but did not have a full understanding as to why I felt this way. By attending the State Street United Methodist Church in Fulton, NY, I was given the opportunity to learn more about the Christian faith and the ceremonies that accompanied it. At the church, Communion ceremonies were held on the first Sunday of each month and for religious holidays. Over time, I learned that Communion ceremonies are a very large component of the Christian faith and wanted to learn more about them; hence why I chose this topic. I also wanted to compare Communion ceremonies to ceremonies in another religious faith in order to have a better understanding as to why they are practiced. Through researching the Communion ceremony I found a ceremony in the Jewish faith to be very similar, the Passover Seder. In fact, Communion is not only similar to the Passover Seder but is directly connected to that ceremony in several ways. To get the research I needed to understand the Passover Seder and Communion, I have consulted sources from various colleges, from my hometown, internet databases and conversed to other people who have had experiences with these ceremonies in the past.

### **The Passover Seder**

#### **Historical Overview of the Passover Seder**

In order to understand why the Passover Seder ceremony exists I read and studied the story of Passover. The story of Passover is contained within the book of Exodus 12:1-28. Passover occurred during the month of Nisan in Egypt. In the scripture, the Lord tells

Moses and Aaron that all families in the community must sacrifice male lambs with no imperfections and sacrifice them on the fourteenth night of Nisan. The blood from these lambs was then spread around the doors of each home using bunches of hyssop plants. If the families complied with the Lord's request, He would *pass over* their homes and not allow the tenth plague to take their first born child. To celebrate this kind act they also had to eat the sacrificed lambs while following strict ceremonial regulations set by the Lord; thus the Passover Seder was created. (*sfr. Nelson 74-76; sfr. Van Voorst 234*).

### **Rules and Regulations for the Passover Seder**

Strict ceremonial rules and regulations for the Passover Seder were created by the Lord and can be found in the book of Exodus, 12:1-28, 45-51. These rules/regulations included when the Seder meal should be held, how it should be eaten, what foods should be included, and who could participate in the event. According to Exodus 12:3-6, "on the tenth day of Nisan every man should take for himself a lamb,...shall keep it until the fourteenth day of Nisan...and then shall kill it at twilight" (Exodus, 12:3 & 6). This means that the Passover Seder is always celebrated on the fourteenth day of Nisan. After sacrificing the lamb, it was then roasted and eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. The Lord then told everyone to eat this meal hastily "with belts on their waists, their sandals on their feet, and with their staffs in their hands" (Exodus, 12:11). When families were finished with their meals they were then required to burn any left over food so that "none of it would remain until the next morning" (Exodus, 12:10). Furthermore, the Lord went into detail about who could eat the Seder meal in Exodus 12:41-51. No foreigners, servants, sojourners or strangers could participate in the ceremony unless they were circumcised. Finally, the Lord set one last rule which stated that no one was allowed to eat leavened bread

for seven days, starting on the fourteenth night of Nisan (the night of the Passover Seder) until the twenty-first night. If the people followed the Lord's requests they would not only be spared from the tenth plague, they would also be guaranteed freedom from Egyptian rule and slavery. This promise of a journey to freedom from slavery was called the *Exodus*. (*sfr. Nelson, 74-76*).

### **Exodus: The Promise of Freedom after Passover**

For “[s]even days [the people] shall eat unleavened bread...[and] observe *the Feast of Unleavened Bread*, for on this same day I will have brought [their] armies out of the land of Egypt” and freed them from slavery (Exodus, 12:15 & 17). The Israelites did as the Lord asked and He granted them freedom by making the Egyptians see their requests to leave as favorable. The Egyptians immediately drove the Israelites out of Egypt before they had time to prepare provisions to take on the journey; therefore they were forced to take unleavened dough with them. On foot, they traveled six hundred thousand miles, from Rameses to Succoth, in order to escape Egyptian control. (*sfr. Nelson, 75-76*).

### **The Meaning and Purpose Behind the Passover Seder**

“So this day shall be to the Israelites a memorial; and they shall keep it as a feast to the Lord throughout their generations...by an everlasting ordinance” (Exodus, 12:14) The Passover Seder is used to commemorate the Lord's gift of freedom from Egyptian enslavement to the Israelites and for passing over their homes during the tenth plague. This ceremony is now passed down from generation to generation as a great teaching tool to help them remember what the Lord did for their ancestors and themselves. The ordinance, songs and prayers that accompany the Passover Seder ceremony can be found within the Hebrew text entitled the

*Haggadah. (sfr. Nelson, 74-76; sfr. Wolfson, 19-21)*

### **The Passover Seder Ceremony Today**

The Passover Seder ceremony can be broken down into fifteen steps. The first step in the ceremony, Kadesh, is to drink the first cup of wine and to sing the Festival Kiddush which praises and thanks God. The second step, Urhatz, is to wash their hands in preparation for eating the Seder meal. The third step, Karpas, is to eat a green vegetable dipped in salt water as an appetizer. This is meant to remind people of their ancestors' struggles in Egypt. Fourth, Yahatz, involves breaking the middle matzah; the broken piece becomes the afikomen or "dessert" of the meal and is symbolic of future redemption. Fifth, the Maggid, includes four different tellings of the story of Exodus and freedom from slavery, and the second cup of wine called the Kos Sheini. Step six is the Rohtzah where participants must wash their hands and recite a blessing; this occurs before the breaking of the unleavened bread. Step seven and eight, the Motzi and Matzah is used to praise and bless God for "bringing forth bread from the earth...the bread of freedom" (Wolfson, p. 26). Step nine is the Maror where bitter herbs are eaten as a symbol of their ancestors' slavery. Tenth, the Korekh binds the matzah and maror together "as a reminder of the paschal offering on Passover night" (Wolfson, p. 26). Step eleven, entitled Shulhan Orekh, is where the main course of the meal is eaten. Twelve, the Tzafun involves finding the hidden afikomen, from step four of the ceremony, to eat for dessert. Thirteen is the Berekah blessings to God after the meal along with the third cup of wine known as Kos Sh'lishi. The fourteenth step is the Hallel and Zemirot (songs), and the Sefirat Ha-Omer or the countdown to the Festival of Shavuot. The final step is the Nirtzah, a closing prayer, and the fourth cup of wine or Kos R'vi'i. (*sfr. Wolfson, 19- 239*)

The actual Seder plate is extremely important to the ceremony as well. The plate

contains six types of symbolic food: the zero'a, beitzah, maror, haroset, karpas and the hazeret. "The zero'a represents the paschal lamb sacrificed by Jews...[and] is the shank bone of lamb which is not eaten (Wolfson, p. 343-344). The beitzah is a hard-boiled, roasted egg which symbolizes the Hagigah sacrifice and is not eaten" (Wolfson, p. 345- 346). Maror is a type of bitter herb that is eaten and symbolizes the Egyptian slavery.

Haroset is used as a reminder of the mortar used to make bricks during slavery; it consists of wine, fruit, nuts, honey and spices and is eaten at the ceremony. Traditionally the karpas is a leafy vegetable that is eaten after it has been dipped in salt water; this is used as a reminder of their ancestors' tears and struggles. Lastly, the hazeret is a second kind of bitter herb eaten to remind people of their ancestors' bitter enslavement in Egypt.(*sfr. Wolfson, 19-239*)

## **Communion**

### **History of Communion**

In order to understand why the Communion ceremony exists I studied the story of the Last Supper, along with the arrest, trial and brutal death of Jesus. During the Last Supper, Jesus gave unleavened bread and wine that he had blessed to all of his disciples.

While doing this Jesus states that the unleavened bread "is His body" and that the wine "...is His blood of the new covenant" (Matthew 26:26 & 28). Communion was created on the night of the Last Supper when Jesus stated the words "take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of me... This cup is the new covenant in My blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me" (1Corinthians, 11:24 & 25). He also states that He is the bread of life, and that anyone that comes to Him and believes in Him would never be hungry or thirsty. Believers would also attain eternal life and live forever with Him in heaven. Soon after the Last Supper, Jesus was betrayed by Judas, captured and sentenced to death by



crucifixion. Jesus took on and accepted every human being's sin as His own through vicious beatings and crucifixion. Jesus' loving act of taking on everyone's sins opened the gates to heaven for all people and freed them from the enslavement of their sins. (*sfr. Nelson, 1180-1183, 1382; sfr. Van Voorst, 254- 256.*)

### **The Meaning and Purpose Behind Communion**

Communion is used to help people remember what Jesus went through while He helped free people from the enslavement of their sins. By going through brutal torture and crucifixion, Jesus took all of the world's sins upon Him, died and suffered for peoples' sins so that they would not have to, and opened the gates of heaven to all people willing to believe in Him as their Savior, Lord and Messiah. Communion also symbolically represents a type of sacrificial meal. The bread and wine used in some Christian ceremonies are symbolically 'changed' into the body and blood of Jesus (Osborne, p. 149) and are seen as something that will always remain within the individual that receives it. However, in Catholicism, a priest consecrates communion into the actual body and blood of Christ; this is called transubstantiation.

### **The Use of Communion Today**

Communion is now a traditionally practiced ceremony throughout many denominations of the Christian faith. Each denomination performs the ceremony of Communion in their own way and at different times of the year. However, the essence, meanings and purposes of the ceremonies are similar.

For example, at my Methodist church, Communion ceremonies are held on the first Sunday of every month and on all Christian religious holidays. The Reverend Judy Alderman always starts out the service with an invitation to the Lord's table, followed by the confession and prayer for the pardon of sins. Next, the members of the congregation offer signs of peace

to one another as well as offer themselves and their gifts to God. At this time, the congregation recites the prayer of Great Thanksgiving and the Lord's Prayer. Now, communion is given to every member in the congregation while the words "the body of Christ, given for you. **Amen.** the blood of Christ, given for you. **Amen**" are spoken (United Methodist Hymnal, p. 12-15). Finally, the congregation is dismissed with a blessing that they will now "go forth in peace...with the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit with all of them" (United Methodist Hymnal, p. 15).

### **How the Seder and Communion Are Interconnected**

In the Bible, within the gospels of Mark and Matthew, it can be proven that the Last Supper was indeed a form of the Passover Seder. Kenan B. Osborne, O.F.M. perfectly outlines these gospel facts in his book, The Christian Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism Conformation, Eucharist on pages 165-167. Osborne makes many solid points on how the Last Supper can be historically considered a Passover Seder. First, "The last supper took place in Jerusalem... and was celebrated at night"(p. 165). Secondly, "a room was made available to [Jesus]" (p. 165). Third, "Jesus celebrated [and reclined at] the [L]ast [S]upper with the twelve" disciples (p. 166). Fourth, Jesus washed the feet of each disciple maintaining a "state of levitical purity"(p. 166). Fifth, bread was broken and red wine was served at the meal; the bread and wine was also interpreted during the meal. Finally, the Last Supper was ended with the Hallel hymn. All of these factors were present in both the Last Supper and a Passover Seder.

### **Conclusion**

By doing research on the Communion ceremony and the Passover Seder, I have gained a great deal of knowledge and an increased respect for both religious faiths. Until this

point in my studies, I never truly realized how much the Jewish faith influences Christianity. I believe that without Judaism and the Passover Seder ceremony, the Communion ceremony may never have existed. I now also understand and appreciate the meaning of Communion and what it represents. As a Christian, I now fully understand the meaning of what Jesus did for all people, freeing them from their sins so that they may reach heaven, if all they do is believe in Him. That message and the other lessons taught through these ceremonies are highly valuable and can enhance all peoples' lives for the better. I also now believe that Passover should be more widely celebrated by Christians; that is a frequently overlooked and misunderstood part of the Christian faith.

By: Erin K. McIntyre