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WHY ‘CHRISTIAN SEDERS’ ARE NOT A GOOD IDEA: A BRIEF EXPLAINER

Pesach (Passover) and Easter are two highly significant festivals for Jews and Christians, respectively, which fall around the same time of year.

At the Council of Christians and Jews, we often encounter Christians who wish to know more about Pesach and its connection to the Easter story (especially in relation to the Last Supper). To help provide some context, we have developed this brief 'explainer'. As well as highlighting some of the background to Pesach and the Seder meal, we want to explain why we think holding 'Christian Seders' is not a good idea.

What is Pesach?

Pesach (or Passover) is a Jewish festival which commemorates the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, recalling their liberation from slavery into freedom.

At the time when the Israelites were crying out for help because of the burdens of slavery and the slaughter of all newborn male babies (Exodus 1), God called on Moses to demand that Pharaoh set them free (Exodus 3:7-10). Only following a series of 10 plagues which were cast upon the Egyptians and that passed over the Israelites, did Pharaoh grant this freedom. In Exodus 12, we read of God's instruction to commemorate the liberation. This includes killing a lamb or a kid goat on the 14th day of the month of Nisan (before sunset) and then eating the lamb that evening with unleavened bread ('matzah') and bitter herbs. Many centuries later, the Paschal lamb, as it came to be known, was taken by each family to the Temple to be killed, and so Pesach became a pilgrimage festival; the Israelites travelled to the Jerusalem Temple to hold the festivities nearby.

Jews recall the Exodus from Egypt in the daily prayer service and refrain from eating leavened bread during the festival of Pesach including the Passover Seder.

What is a Passover Seder?

Following the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., the practice changed. As Judaism adjusted to prayer and rituals without a temple and life outside Israel, Pesach shifted to be observed as a festival of 7/8 days, with a Passover ritual meal being observed by all, with some Jews holding two seder nights and others only one.

This traditional ritual meal is called a Seder ('order') and is usually observed in homes with family and friends and sometimes in synagogues as communities. A Seder includes readings, stories, songs, and symbolic foods such as matzah, and four cups of wine. The liturgy with instructions for the Seder is printed in a book called a Haggadah. It includes the storytelling of the Exodus from Egypt alongside the 14 steps and rituals that make up the Seder. The Seder as it exists today also includes many rabbinic stories, and even a comic song at the end.

Why are Christians interested in the Seder?

There are references to a Passover Meal in the New Testament Scriptures (see for example, Mt. 26:17–30, Mk. 14:12–26, Lk. 22:7–39 and Jn. 13:1–17:26). The Last Supper (the final meal which Jesus had with his disciples, before his arrest, trial and crucifixion) has been interpreted as a Passover meal.

Therefore, Christians are often interested in the Seder Passover meal through a desire to understand and contextualise the Last Supper, and consequently the Eucharist/Lord's Supper/Mass, which recalls this.

Maundy Thursday is the day in Holy Week where the Last Supper is remembered. This is when some churches hold a 'Christian Seder', which reworks the Haggadah to focus on the person of Christ within this ritual. While this may be performed with good intentions (to deepen understanding of the shared heritage between Christianity and Judaism), we believe that this good intention can be directed more appropriately in a way that accepts the living traditions of Jewish communities.

The Last Supper and Seders

Although the Last Supper happened around Pesach, there are some discrepancies over whether or not the Last Supper was a Passover meal (John's Gospel places it at a different time, for example).

However, regardless of this, the Last Supper could not have contained most of the prayers and readings of the Seder. Except for the Psalms, all of them were probably written after the time of Jesus. Pesach celebrations looked radically different 2,000 years ago, before the loss of the Temple and the writing of the Haggadah. So even if the Last Supper was a Passover meal, it would have been nothing like a modern Jewish Seder, which no longer even includes the eating of the roast Paschal lamb. The Judaism of today, like Christianity, is a descendant of Second Temple Judaism that has evolved over time.

Theological Problems

'Christian Seders' run the risk of both appropriating modern Jewish customs and rituals, and of promoting the notion that Christianity replaces Judaism (referred to as Supersessionism and Replacement Theology).

In 'Christian Seders', those attending may well imagine that the matzah and wine symbolise Christ. But using them in this way is to replace a living Jewish ritual with a Christian theology. Christians would undoubtedly be uncomfortable with non-Christian groups adapting Holy Communion to portray an alternative understanding of Christ.

Replacement theology in 'Christian Seders' can reinforce Christian anti-Judaism, which has a long, shameful, and dangerous history (read more about this here: https://bit.ly/3Jd3Blm). Rather than Christianity replacing Judaism, both religions should be respected as separate living faiths.

For some Jews, a 'Christian Seder' may be a painful reminder of centuries of rejection by Christians for not accepting Jesus. Attending a Seder while thinking of Jesus places this harmful theology at the heart of an important Jewish festival.

Positive Steps to Take

Of course, sharing our traditions can be a valuable way to learn from each other. If you're Jewish, consider inviting Christian friends to share in your Seder. And if you're Christian, attending a Jewish Seder as a respectful guest can help you learn about Judaism. You may also want to consider, at another time of the year, inviting someone Jewish to your community to explain what happens weekly in a Jewish home on a Friday evening, when the Sabbath is celebrated.

In Holy Week, we can learn from each other's traditions as guests — without appropriation of each other's rituals.

Some Other Questions to Consider in Holy Week and Further Resources

- **Praying** – does your church pray for 'the Jews' during Holy Week? If so, what wording are you using? Consider exploring updated versions if they are available.
- **Preaching** – what message are we sending to our congregations in regard to Jewish-Christian relations in our sermons? How are we talking about Jewish people and Judaism during Holy Week?
- **Liturgy** – have you considered checking for any liturgical revisions?
- **Lectionary readings** – Might you add explanatory notes, or provide context in a sermon?

- In this interview, New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine, pioneer of exploring the First Century Jewish context to the New Testament, compares and contrasts Holy Week and Jewish traditions: https://religionnews.com/2019/03/07/a-fresh-take-on-lent-from-jewish-new-testament-professor-amy-jill-levine/

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