



Easter and Passover

“Passover” in the New Testament

Having discussed the origins of Passover in the Hebrew Bible, we now turn to Easter in the New Testament - which, even in the first and second centuries, was seen as a Christianized Passover. The Christian celebration of Easter calendrically lines up with the Passover celebration, as it continues to adapt Passover to the Christian faith. Passover is associated with Jesus in the New Testament in multiple ways: Jesus’s Last Supper lines up with the Passover meal with unleavened bread in all four gospels (resembling the Passover seder in both look and sound), and Jesus functions conceptually as a sacrificial lamb in Paul’s writings (though this is not the most obvious or most-cited way to conceptualize Jesus’s atoning sacrifice). Sacrifice was not Passover-specific, so if the idea of Jesus’s sacrifice is expiatory or serves as atonement for communal sins, other sacrificial events would have been better-suited to the task both conceptually and narratively. Passover, our professors argue here, has liberative and national identity-related significance, and as such, connecting the passion of Christ with the Passover sacrifice signifies a freedom from slavery. Passover deals with literal slavery to foreign powers, and Easter then deals with freedom from slavery to death and sin. John’s Gospel makes the connection between Jesus and the sacrificial paschal lamb even stronger, as his death lines up with Passover preparations.

Easter is never really discussed in the text. The earliest references to the holiday we now call Easter is the Aramaic word for pesach, Pascha. It is also thought to be related to the Greek word for pain or suffering. Both come together to form this theologically serious pun makes the Pascha a perfect time to recognize the Passover tradition and the relevant recognition of the suffering of Jesus. There are also calendrical ramifications of early Christian thinking on what became Easter, as part of the Passover adaptation process involves a shift from Saturday to Sunday, to honor the day of the resurrection.

In the next session, we will be discussing what happens to Passover after the biblical period.

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