

WHAT IS A PASSOVER SEDER?

In Hebrew, **Seder** means "order" and designates the components of a rite. When we speak of the **Passover Seder** we mean the whole celebration - which can last a few hours - during which Jews commemorate and re-live in a family setting the event of their liberation from Egypt: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord our God, with his strong hand and outstretched arm, led us out of it. If the Holy one, blessed be he, had not led us out of Egypt, we, our children and our children's children would still be slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt" (Text from the *Haggadah*).

Since the most important moment of the **Passover Seder** is the account of how God liberated his people from Egypt "with a strong hand and outstretched arm", it is commonly called *Haggadah*, a term that means "narration", from the root *ngd*: "to tell". The *Haggadah* is the most important text of the Jewish Passover, based on the biblical precept to tell one's children of God's intervention to liberate his people from Egypt (Dt. 6: 20). It is made up of fixed elements and variables (according to the communities in the Diaspora) and enriched by miniatures, drawings, songs, commentaries and various rubrics.

According to the experts, the *Haggadah* as it is known today and as a separate liturgical text, was first drawn up around the 7th or 8th century of the Christian era. But if the setting on paper was rather late, the rites and prayers are much older. The most important are found already in the Mishna (first written collection of the Oral Torah of Judaism which goes back to the second century), and some even go back to the pre-Christian era. As a memorial that actualizes God's liberating action in favor of his people, the **Seder** has been commented and re-interpreted by the Jews from generation to generation, down to our day.

The text of the *Haggadah*, the central part of the **Seder**, was printed for the first time in 1482, in Guadalajara, in Spain. Editions have multiplied, making

of this book one of the most beautiful, richest and most popular works of Judaism.

JESUS AND THE PASSOVER SEDER

The New Testament tells us that Jesus was faithful to the observance of the Passover, as well as the feasts of Pentecost (*Shavu'ot*) and Tabernacles (*Sukkot*). In Matthew 26:17 we read: "Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus to say, "Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

"To eat the Passover" is synonymous with "to celebrate the Passover". The expression refers to the central moment in the rite which is that of the immolation of the lamb in the Temple of Jerusalem and the family eating of certain pieces of it, as a "memorial" of God's liberating intervention in favor of his people when it was oppressed in Egypt.

But apart from these two facts - the immolation of the lamb and its "memorial" value - the New Testament tells us nothing of the manner of celebrating the Passover, and there are no contemporary sources. At any rate, it was not a **Passover Seder** as it is celebrated today, since the latter, as we have said, came only several centuries later.

From the historical point of view, we must also add that we cannot affirm, based on the New Testament, that Jesus' Last Supper was a **Passover meal**. Some scholars would tend to see it rather as a **farewell meal**.

At any rate, the authors of the New Testament agree in their *Paschal interpretation of Jesus' death on the cross and of his testament-memorial transmitted during the Last Supper*: "Do this in memory of me" (Lk. 22:19).

EUCHARIST AND PASSOVER SEDER

The Christian Eucharist, through which the Church transmits the memorial of the death and resurrection of Jesus down through the centuries, is linked not only to the Passover but also to the Jewish prayer of blessing which, already in the New Testament period, accompanied the main meals: "As they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and when **he had said the blessing** he broke it and gave it to the disciples. And he took a cup and **when he had given thanks** he gave it to them saying..." (Mt. 26:26-27).

The phrases **say the blessing** and **give thanks** recall one of the most important liturgical actions of Judaism: the prayer **before the meal** (*birkat ha-motzi*) and **after the meal** (*birkat ha-mazon*), which consists in recognizing in the good things of the earth the benevolence of God, creator and redeemer, whose goodness underlies them and transforms them into gifts.

It is thought that this prayer, which begins with the *birkat ha-motzi* (of rabbinical origin) and ends with the *birkat ha-mazon* (of biblical origin since it is based on Dt. 8:10), for its essential elements goes back to the post-exilic period (after 587 BC). It accompanies every meal, including the Passover meal.

Even according to the hypothesis that Jesus celebrated a farewell meal instead of the Passover meal, the essential link remains between what he says and does and the prayer of blessing. In fact, this blessing is mandatory for all meals, and not only for the Passover meal.

It is in this context of the blessing that Jesus instituted the memorial of his death and resurrection, and it is also in this context that the Church transmits it during its Eucharistic Prayer, which is at the center of its own liturgy.

CAN WE SPEAK OF A CHRISTIAN SEDER?

It is ambiguous to speak of a **Christian Seder**. It should be avoided because it is historically incorrect. The expression "Christian celebration of the Passover Seder" is equally ambiguous and should be avoided, for the **Passover Seder** belongs to the Jewish tradition and only the Jews celebrate it. On the other hand, it may be correct to speak of a **Passover Seder for Christian communities**, or of a **Christian celebration with texts from the Passover Seder**.

In such cases, **Jewish Passover Seder** texts or rituals may be used during a Christian prayer or para-liturgy, on the principle that the Christian tradition has always been enriched by elements from the Jewish tradition: from the reading of the Torah and the prophets to the praying of the Psalms. However, in such cases, it must be very clear *that it is not a matter of appropriating the Jewish rite, but of re-discovering one's own faith in the light of the Jewish tradition, to which one must be open with gratitude.*

CAN A CHRISTIAN CELEBRATE THE SEDER?

Since it is a constitutive rite of Judaism, the **Passover Seder** can only be celebrated by Jews: they are its subjects and recipients. But that does not mean that its wealth must remain inaccessible to Christians.

The ideal would be to participate in a **Passover Seder** as guest of Jewish friends, in their home. Thus one would truly be "guest" of the Jewish tradition and faith to which the Church is "linked by its very identity" (cf. Notes I,2).

Among Christians, it will not be a celebration of the **Seder**, but a reflection and study to deepen the text, in a "listening" full of respect and gratitude.

In that case, we may invite to the group or community, a rabbi or practising Jew, that is, someone truly competent, asking the person to share her/his experience and reading of the **Passover Seder**: texts, rites, symbolism and history.

If the presence of a rabbi is not possible, Christians can approach the **Passover Seder** alone or in groups and study its structure, read the text, explain the rites with the help of a competent person sensitive to Judaism. It is clear that in such cases we must speak not of the celebration of the **Passover Seder** but of a pedagogical and didactic study.

CONCLUSION

To know the **Passover Seder**, it does not suffice to read the texts and understand the symbols; it is also necessary to enter into communion with the faith of the Jewish people who incarnate it and continue to transmit it.

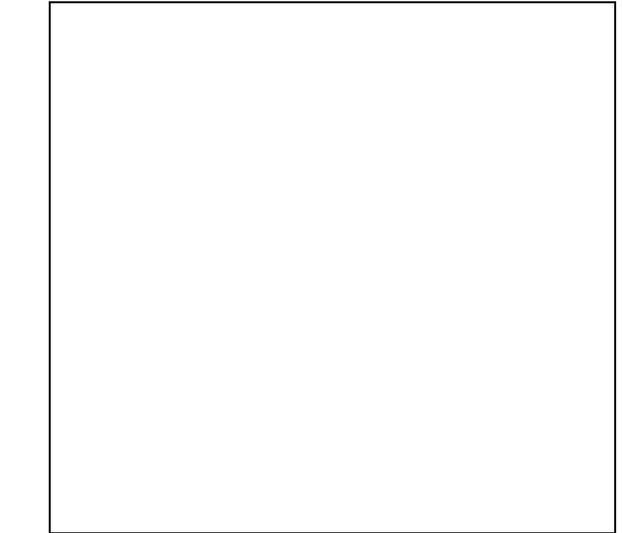
That is why the attitude of Christians toward the **Passover Seder** consists in sharing the history of the Jewish people, welcoming as an incomparable gift the fact of being "guests" in their "house", and in discovering the link that binds us to them, as the first lines of *Nostra Aetate*, N.4 state: "*As this sacred Synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it recalls the spiritual bond linking the people of the New Covenant with Abraham's stock*" (Vatican Council II).

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CELEBRATION OF THE "PASSOVER SEDER" IN A CHRISTIAN MILIEU



"The Church, each one of us and our communities can be understood and defined only in relation to the holy roots of our faith; hence to the meaning of the Jewish people in history, with its mission and permanent vocation".

(Card. C. Maria Martini)

INTRODUCTION

In certain Christian milieux (groups, religious communities, parishes) there is a growing practice of celebrating the Jewish Passover meal with the intention of living and understanding better the Christian Paschal celebration.

This leaflet proposes a few reflection guidelines and orientations to prevent the practice from becoming a source of ambiguity, and so that it may respect both Jewish and Christian identities.