

# “LET US RECITE BEFORE HIM A NEW SONG” THE PASSOVER HAGGADAH AND THE GOSPELS

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The Passover Haggadah promises much but delivers little. The Haggadah was born of the duty to recount the deliverance and exodus from Egypt, a duty accompanied by the promise that “whoever enlarges on the telling of the Exodus is praiseworthy”. But the greater the expectation and promise, the greater the disappointment. The Passover Haggadah is a collection of passages that do not blend together and merge into a proper story. While the story of the exodus is meant to be the focal point of the Seder night, the redactors of the Haggadah seem to have made every possible effort to avoid telling it at all.

A comparison of the text as a whole to other texts does no more than add to the bafflement. Jewish liturgy created some truly rare poetical gems. See for example the universality of the *amida* prayer in the New Year services, the *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) about the worship the High Priest conducted at the Temple, the *u'Netaneh Tokef* or the *Nishmat Kol Hai* prayer. Some of the lamentations composed for the fast of Tisha B'Av tear at the heartstrings to this very day. How then are we to understand the resounding literary failure of the Passover Haggadah? How is it that for the two millennia of the Haggadah's existence, no gifted liturgist, poet or author took it upon himself to

write a sublime literary work that would tell the story of the great drama of the exodus of a people from slavery to freedom? That no one wrote a composition that would meet the universal, national, religious and educational expectations that the Seder night is meant to spark in the hearts of participants through the ages?

Ostensibly, these queries have a clear, well-founded answer. The great drama of the deliverance from Egypt is already recounted in the Bible, in the Book of Exodus, and it is a story equally as splendid as the best of national epics. It involves xenophobia, bondage and torment, a hero born into peril, an evil monarch, to say nothing of war and calamities. But all's well that ends well, and these hazards ultimately culminate in redemption and deliverance. Nevertheless, this excellent epic is not the one recounted during the Seder service. The key section of the Haggadah revolves around a “homily” which makes every possible effort to sidestep telling the story as it appears in the Book of Exodus, replacing it with five verses from Deuteronomy which offer a laconic précis of the exodus from Egypt.

Moreover, if the commandment is to narrate a tale, where is the story? The Haggadah is a hodgepodge of unrelated sections. The resulting

impression is that various editors and redactors tossed in whatever was at hand – early texts that had already appeared in the Mishnah, and later texts of which we have no information as to their provenance. At the beginning of the Seder, it is customary among Ashkenazi Jews to recite the “scheduled agenda” for the entire evening: *kadesh, u’rechatz, karpas, yahatz*, etc. (the blessing over the wine, the washing of the hands, eating green vegetables, breaking the matzah, etc.). The portion of the Seder devoted to the narrative merits only a single word, *maggid*, while the rest of the items on the agenda are rituals. In addition, the Haggadah has no logical internal division. The names of Mishnaic sages are mentioned both at the beginning and the end of the Haggadah, and there is no apparent coherent literary conception organizing the transition from one section to the next.

If we shift our view from the text itself to the overall liturgical status of the Seder, the sense of disappointment mushrooms into that of a missed opportunity. The Passover Haggadah is a lengthy, central liturgical text which is celebrated at home rather than at the synagogue. It is the only event in the Jewish calendar in which the service is conducted by the family, not by a community of worshippers. In many homes there is no designated Seder leader (and indeed such an official title or position is not at all obligatory), and the entire family takes part in reading the Haggadah: men and women, adults and children. The commandment of the day is “and you shall relate to your son”, and we would now add “and your daughter”.

But what is it exactly that we are relating to our sons and daughters? That the Egyptians suffered not just ten plagues, but fifty? That whoever does not mention or recite *Pessah, Matza* and *Maror* (the paschal sacrifice, the unleavened bread and the bitter herbs) has not fulfilled the obligation of observing the ritual of the Passover celebration? That the response to the Wicked Son is a retort meant to blunt the sharpness of his teeth and his sarcasm, and that he is then to be cast out – not just from the family – but from Jewish history?

The reason for all this may lie in the sanctification and canonization undergone by the text, so that the very act of its recitation fulfilled the obligation of recounting the story. Who would dare create a new story to replace a text that had already become hallowed? While it is well-known that many families, including non-observant Jews, make a point to carefully read the Haggadah in its entirety, less well-known is the fact that there is no *halachic* obligation to read the Passover Haggadah at the Seder. Unlike the Bible’s Five Scrolls which are prescribed reading on particular holidays – the Book of Esther on Purim, the Song of Songs on Passover, the Book of Ruth on Shavuot (Pentecost), the Book of Lamentations on the Fast of Tisha B’Av, and Ecclesiastes on Sukkot (the Feast of the Tabernacles) – the *halacha* does not require the reading of any particular text at the Seder. In theory, parents may answer their child’s question of “What makes this night different from all other nights?” in whatever way they choose. The Haggadah is merely one possible way to answer, no more and no less. The only obligatory text is the *Hallel*, a prayer of thanksgiving com-

posed of Psalms which express gratitude to God as savior and redeemer.

That said, even a quick perusal of the Haggadah clearly indicates that there are regular ritual actions designated for each of its sections. Here one uncovers the matzah, there the middle matzah must be broken in two, elsewhere one must recline and drink a glass – make that four glasses – of wine, and so on and so forth – a veritable litany of detailed rituals. In other words, something in the text itself rendered it canonic, not any external directive. Yet even in the Haggadah's present form, which was finalized a mere few centuries ago, it remains an open text, one that can be abridged or expanded. Unlike many prayers, not only is it permissible to speak in the course of the Haggadah-reading, Seder participants are welcomed and even encouraged to offer interpretations and explanations to the text. If we may paraphrase, "whoever interprets much is praiseworthy". In point of fact, the Passover Haggadah has become the subject of many commentaries, out-numbering even the commentaries on the Torah. Yet even after setting aside all the disappointments engendered by the text, and perhaps also some moral objections to certain parts of the Haggadah, the question still remains: What is the secret of this text? What made it so successful?

The explanation offered below is an attempt at a partial response. The underlying argument is that the Passover Haggadah is designed not merely for the purpose of telling the story of the exodus, but also to ensure that the story retains its supremacy in the face of a difficult, threatening religious challenge: Christianity. Christianity set

at the center of its world a new, alternative story of salvation, entirely based on the biblical festival of Passover – the story of Jesus's crucifixion took place on Passover and its symbols and components are taken from the biblical story of Passover. Jesus is a second Moses of sorts, and the circumstances of his birth are reminiscent of those of Moses. The death of Jesus transformed him into the lamb of God (*Agnus Dei*) which is sacrificed on Passover. Pharaoh personifies death, and the land of Egypt stands for the underworld. The exodus from Egypt stands for humankind's victory over death, which was realized in the person of Jesus who was crucified and then resurrected. The bread that Jesus ate at the Last Supper is the Bread of Affliction which represents his passion on the cross. In addition, in keeping with Mishnaic stipulation in Tractate Pesahim, also the Christian story "begins with disgrace and ends with praise". In order to comprehend the magnitude of the threat Christianity posed to the Jewish Passover, one need look no further than a reading of Jeremiah's prophecy (31,30-32) through Christian eyes:

See, a time is coming – declares the Lord – when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers, when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, a covenant which they broke, though I espoused them – declares the Lord. But such is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel after these days – declares the Lord: I will put My Teaching into their inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts. Then I will be their God, and

they shall be My people.

The new covenant described by the prophet Jeremiah will replace the covenant made in Sinai with the Israelites who left Egypt, and which was later breached by the Jewish people. Christianity argues that the Jews betrayed their old covenant with the Lord by crucifying his son, and therefore the time has come for a new covenant, a new testament (Hebr 8,7-13). This position sheds new light on a quote incorporated into the Haggadah from the Mishnah, Tractate Brachot:

Recounting the Exodus from Egypt at night.

Rabbi Elazar Ben Azaria said: Truly, I am like a man of seventy years of age, yet I was nonetheless never privileged to hear the narration of the exodus from Egypt at night until I heard Ben Zoma expound on this, for it is written: “That you may remember the day of your going forth from the land of Egypt all the days your life. “The days of your life” signify the days alone, but “all the days of your life” include the nights too. The Sages, however, explain this text thus: “The days of your life” refers to this world only; but “all the days of your life” includes the days after the coming of the Messiah.

This homily presents two views with regard to the duty to remember the exodus from Egypt: according to Ben Zoma, the obligation is binding both day and night; whereas the Sages consider it binding both in this world and the next, after the messiah arrives. This homily is, in fact, unrelated to the Seder because it deals with “remembering the exodus”, a duty imposed on all Jews all year round. The duty at the Seder is “to tell the story”

of the exodus. Why then was this passage incorporated into the Haggadah? I believe it was due to the view voiced by the Sages, that the deliverance and exodus from Egypt cannot be stricken from the Jewish memory even after the final salvation and the coming of the Messiah. This view seems like a direct polemic with the Christian argument that the salvation which Jesus wrought nullified the requirement to remember and recall the salvation of the Old Testament, i.e., the deliverance from Egypt. Incorporating this passage into the Haggadah was meant as an unequivocal declaration that the story of salvation from Egypt has no alternative, nor will there ever be one.

Nearly all of the Haggadah’s contents can be accounted for through an interpretation along the same lines. The object of the key Seder text is to contend with the rivalry posed by the Christian story of salvation. It is a struggle over sacred memory and sacred time. The sacred time is shared by both religions, but each religious community celebrates it differently. The Jews had to contend with the transformation of the biblical model of the Passover salvation into a new Passover festival, one at whose center lies a new savior and which takes place at the very same time as Passover: the Last Supper versus the Seder, the crucifixion of Jesus versus the offering of the paschal sacrifice. As early as the second century C.E. we hear of believers in Jesus congregating on Passover eve to relate and commemorate the story of Jesus’ passion on the cross and his salvation. They do so on the very evening on which Jews congregate to recount the story of the exodus from Egypt.

In the second century, a rule was instituted in Rome that Easter is to be celebrated on the first Sunday after the equinox and after the full moon. This rule remains in effect to this day. Sunday marks the resurrection of Jesus, and the preceding Friday his crucifixion. According to the Gospel tradition, the crucifixion took place either on the 14th day of the Jewish month of Nissan (Passover eve) or on the 15th (Passover day). According to the Jewish calendar, Passover can fall on different days of the week each year, so the celebration of Easter and Passover do not necessarily coincide.

Yet the Christians in the Middle East were loath to waive the full link between the day of the crucifixion and the day of the offering of the paschal sacrifice. In the Land of Israel, Syria and Asia Minor, Christians continued to adhere to Nissan 14th (and not Friday) as the day of the crucifixion, and marked it by mourning and fasting, as befits people recalling the death of the messiah. The fast lasts until midnight of the night between the 14th and the 15th of Nissan. The second half of that night was devoted to celebrating the salvation wrought by Jesus.

Imagine what took place in communities with a mixed Jewish-Christian population in the early centuries of the C.E. On the eve of the 15th of Nissan, Jews and Christians alike gathered at home to commemorate an extremely important event. Up until midnight Jews recounted the story of the exodus and feasted and drank (four cups of wine!) to express their joy and thanksgiving for the exodus from Egypt. The meal ended at midnight. At that very same time, Christians were sitting at home, fasting and recounting the story

of the crucifixion. At midnight the roles were reversed. When the Jewish celebration ended, the Christian one began.

Let us explore the story of the five second-century sages in Bnei Brak “who recounted the exodus from Egypt all that night”. During Mishnaic times, the meal preceded the story. The meal was consumed in the evening, and then the narration went on until morning. The people in the story are a group of five men who assembled in one place. We do not yet hear of a family gathering, of women and children. Another contemporary text, the *tosefta*, relates a similar meeting: sages from Raban Gamliel’s circle who convened in Lod. Once again, there is no reference to women or children. But there is a difference in subject matter. The sages at Bnei Brak recounted the exodus, whereas those in Lod studied the rules of the Passover sacrifice, as befits the circle of Raban Gamliel, Prince of the Sanhedrin. Their Seder was of a more intellectual bent, it was not appropriate for a family gathering.

Both initiatives were meant to fill the large void left by the destruction of the Second Temple. As long as the Temple existed, the evening festivities consisted of sacrificing the paschal offering and then consuming it in the company of other holiday observers. Jesus’ assembled party – he, his twelve disciples, and perhaps a few other companions – could be considered a completely typical of people who made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the paschal sacrifice and eat the slaughtered lamb. They were all men, and we hear no mention of women or children at the Last Supper. It stands to reason that this makeup

was common of pilgrims to Jerusalem. Few families took the trouble to make the long, arduous journey in springtime, early in the farming season. After the destruction of the Temple the need for a substitute arose. In Bnei Brak the alternative chosen was to tell a story, in Lod they chose to study.

An examination of the structure of the Mishnah's Tractate Pesahim indicates that even at the time it was being compiled the study of the rules of the paschal sacrifice had a central role. The vast majority of the tractate is devoted to the practical details involved in performing the sacrifice, whereas only the final chapter addresses the duty to relate the story of the exodus. The resulting impression is that this chapter was tacked on to a tractate that had already been compiled and completed and which dealt with the rules governing *hametz* and the paschal sacrifice. The redactor of the Mishnah, Rabbi Judah, followed in the footsteps of the tradition set by his grandfather Rabban Gamliel. Elsewhere we have also seen review of the laws of sacrifice as a substitute for making a sacrificial offering. A significant portion of the Yom Kippur prayers is devoted to the *seder avoda*, the rules of service, which describes the sacrifice being offered by the High Priest at the Temple on Yom Kippur. Consequently, the solution offered by Rabban Gamliel seems perfectly natural and in keeping with contemporary trends. All the same, this was not the solution that won out. During the second century, telling the narrative emerged victorious over study, and family gatherings took the place of assembled scholars. As early as the days of the Mishnah – two genera-

tions after the story of the sages in Bnei Brak – we first hear mention of “the son” as playing a role in the structure of the evening. And where there is a son, there is also a father, to do the teaching and educating. “The son”, or rather the four sons, represent the next generation, the ones to whom the proper memory of the exodus must be conveyed. The victory of the story over study is also the victory of the home over the *beit midrash*. This victory serves as proof substantiating the immense educational significance attached to the Seder as a family event, an importance resulting from the severity of the threat posed by the Seder's rivals, by those who tell an alternative story, the one told by the disciples and followers of Jesus. It may be, therefore, that the earliest “Passover Haggadah” is the one in the Gospels, and that the Jewish Haggadah is a response to the Christian story. What might have been the makeup of the Christian story told that night? Certainly, it told of the crucifixion. But that would not have been enough. It must be linked to the great biblical story of the exodus from Egypt. The biblical story of salvation must be taken and converted into a prefiguration which predicts and prophesies the story of Jesus. The Old Testament must foretell the New Testament, and the first Moses foreshadow the second Moses, the ultimate savior. As noted above, the desire to represent Jesus as the second Moses is apparent in the perils attending the story of his birth, his miraculous deliverance, and the flight of the family to Egypt. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Herod is the counterpart of Pharaoh. A link must now be made between the two stories, but how? At this point there is need of

exegesis, or perhaps more exactly of “*midrash*”. The Torah is the text of the story of the exodus, the midrash is the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Definitive proof that such a midrash did indeed exist comes from the second half of the second century in a text written by Melito, Bishop of Sardis, Asia Minor. He wrote a homily for Easter which begins with a literal reading of the “Hebrew” story of the exodus, which is then followed by a reading of what the author calls the mystery of the story, i.e., the story of Jesus. According to the veiled, hidden interpretation, the lamb of the Passover sacrifice prefigures and is a model for the *Agnus Dei*, the sacrifice of Jesus. The torment suffered by the Israelites in Egypt and the bitter herbs (*maror*) prefigure the passion of Christ. The matzah represents the incarnation of the son of God, and so on. Melito’s homily proves an important point: that the Christian story uses the biblical story set out in the Book of Exodus as its basis, but cannot stop there. It must have a Christian midrash that views the Passover celebration of the exodus from Egypt as an omen heralding the future of the Passover celebration in the days of Jesus. The biblical story has no independent standing in its own right.

The Jewish response was to return to the original story of the exodus from Egypt. Yet surprisingly, the Jewish story turns its back on the Book of Exodus, where the story is set out in full. Instead, it quotes five verses from Deuteronomy 26, which are recited as a prayer when bringing first-fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem and which very succinctly summarizes the exodus. It is in

connection with these five verses that the longest and most coherent part of the Haggadah develops, and which Haggadah scholar Daniel Goldschmidt considered the “nucleus” of the Haggadah. This section is a midrash, i.e., an amplified interpretation of the verses from Deuteronomy. They are split up into small units, with each unit being given its parallel from Exodus with references such “as it is written” to corroborate the version in Deuteronomy. In most cases, the midrash does not add anything in terms of understanding the verse, and only rarely does it offer an interpretation that deviates from the original meaning of the verse.

One such exception comes as the beginning of this portion. Who is the “Aramean losing my father” in Deut 26,5? All Haggadah readers will be quick to respond: Laban – father to Rachel and Leah, and father-in-law to Jacob. That is what the Haggadah says: “Go forth and learn what Laban the Aramean intended to do to our father Jacob. For Pharaoh decreed the destruction only of the males, while Laban intended to root out the whole, as it is written: An Aramean who is losing my father”. The homilist in the Haggadah understands Aramean to be Laban, who desired “to lose”, i.e., to annihilate, “my father” Jacob. This interpretation is the very reverse of what the text says. The Aramean in the bible is not Laban, but rather Jacob, who was called so because he fled to Aram in fear of Esau. “To lose” (*oved*) is not a transitive verb, but rather an intransitive one. Jacob was lost, an exile from his home. According to the homilist, Laban intended to root out the whole, that is to kill Jacob, the father of the Is-

raelite nation. Yet not the slightest trace of such an intention is to be found in the stories of Laban and Jacob in the Book of Genesis.

Like his Christian counterpart, who sought “hidden” meanings in the story of the exodus, so too the Jewish homilist goes beyond the literal meaning of the text. He tried to make less of Pharaoh’s cruelty and his edict that “every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile” through making a comparison with a worse and more bitter enemy, the Aramean. The words Aramean and Roman have a similar ring to them. The Jews’ greatest enemy when the homilist was writing was Rome. Did he consider Laban the Aramean, Jacob’s enemy, as a personification of Rome, which destroyed the Temple and which supposedly wished to “root out the whole”? Or perhaps this was an attempt to fashion a counter-story to the Christian story about Herod, king by the grace of Rome, who carried out the Slaughter of the Innocents with the intention of “rooting out the whole” and murdering Jesus? Was the homilist trying to say: the Christians have Herod, we have Laban?

That said, the rest of the interpretations in the Jewish homily do no more than offer parallels, mostly from Exodus, to the verses in Deuteronomy. Why then was the full story from Exodus not chosen to begin with, as did Bishop Melito of Sardis? Why opt for a few unfleshed out verses from Deuteronomy and bolster them with quotes from Exodus? The answer that comes to mind is that Deuteronomy does not mention the name of Moses, the great savior during the exodus from Egypt. Calling attention to Moses’ role in the story of the deliverance from Egypt might fuel

the Christian claim as to the role of the second savior, Jesus. Alternatively, the very fact that the Christians chose to use the story from Exodus precluded the Jews from adopting it. The Jewish side chose the bare-bones story in Deuteronomy and “supplemented” it through the “heftier” story in Exodus. The role of the Jewish midrash is primarily technical. On the other hand, the Christian interpretation cannot find any hints of the crucifixion and resurrection without resorting to a midrash. The need for a midrash was, therefore, born on the Christian side, and the Jewish midrash is a literary response which adopts the literary model without adopting its allegorical reading.

Nevertheless, adherence to the story of the Exodus was insufficient to “inoculate” the Jews against the contagion of the Christian “virus”. Long before Christianity, the exodus was considered paradigmatic for any future salvation. One such example is the story of redemption in the Book of Esther. The climax of the drama took place on Passover, not Purim. Haman was hanged during Passover – eleven months before the Jews smote their enemies. The reversal in King Xerxes’ opinion vis-à-vis Haman takes place in the middle of the night when the Persian king’s sleep deserted him, an allusion to the Israelites’ sleepless night during the exodus from Egypt.

Consequently, the main thrust of the Seder service, certainly in its later development, could not have adhered to the story of the exodus as is, but also considered it a model of future salvation. The Passover Haggadah is not only a counter-story but also a counter-*interpretation* of a story (the exodus) shared by both Jews and Christians. As is



the nature of hermeneutics, it is fashioned piecemeal. Taken as a whole, it forms a systematic continuum of statements of a local nature. Christians had a new narrative to recount and they related it in the Gospels. The Jewish story masquerades as an old story while being reinterpreted.

The new interpretation is also embodied in the ceremonial development of the Seder, which involves unmistakable theatrical elements. The ceremony takes place together the reading of the text, with these elements serving as indications symbolizing the transition from the past redemption in Egypt early on in the Seder to the anticipation of future redemption by the end of the evening. The climax takes place with the opening of the door before the recitation of *shfokh hamatha* (Pour Our Thy Wrath), imbibing the four cups of salvation, consuming the *afikoman*, and *piyyutim* that are laden with messianic expectations.

Some people believe opening the door is meant as a preventive measure, to ensure that the body of a dead Christian child had not been concealed behind it and, thereby, avert a blood libel being brought against the Jews. In point of fact, the opening of the door is meant to extend a welcoming invitation to the Prophet Elijah, the herald of salvation. At one time it was customary for the person running the Seder to dress up as the Prophet Elijah and stage a dramatized version of Elijah's messianic arrival.

In the Middle Ages, religious Christian plays were designed and performed to illustrate the story of the Passion – the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus. One such play is still in exis-

tence to this very day and is performed once every ten years in the Bavarian city of Oberammergau, Germany. The Passion plays took place out on the city streets, as the public space was Christian. The only space available to Jews was the private one, so they made do with a play staged at home, in private, family space.

The *afikoman* had an important role to play in the messianic story of the Seder, and its history provides an instructive episode in the development of the discourse between the Jewish Seder and Easter. The earliest reference to the *afikoman* is in the Mishnah (Tractate Pesahim) which stipulates: "After the paschal sacrifice there be no *afikoman* [dessert]". The *tosefta* and the Talmud both explain that the prohibition against eating dessert after the sacrificial feast is meant to preserve the taste of the sacrifice, or to prevent people from going from one group of celebrators to another. Some scholars consider the etymology of the word *afikoman* to be from the Greek word *epikomion*, which means revelry. The prohibition was meant to prevent an inappropriate ending to the festive meal.

The section that discusses the four sons raises the question by the Wise Son: "What are the testimonies, statutes and judgements which the Lord our God has commanded you?" The answer he gets is "Then you shall instruct him in the laws of the Passover: after the paschal lamb no *afikoman* must be added." Why is it that of all the Passover laws about which the Wise Son asked, this particular one was chosen? That is tantamount to telling a child today not to go to a club after the Seder.

In order to understand the rationale underpinning the answer to the Wise Son, one must learn about another meaning of the *afikoman*. David Daube has shown that in the homily by Melito of Sardis, the Greek word *aphikomenos* (“he who comes”) is used twice in reference to Jesus, the God who became incarnate and “came” into this world to atone for its sins. Melito belonged to the Christian circles who celebrated Easter on the night of the 14th of Nissan. As mentioned, they would fast all evening – while the Jews were celebrating Passover – and mourn and lament the crucifixion of Christ. At midnight, when the Jews concluded their celebration and were then forbidden from eating *afikoman*, it was time for the Christian celebration meant to mark the redemption and Jesus’ victory over death to begin.

The homily by Melito does not ascribe to the word *afikoman* a sense of eating or festivities. Rather, it marks the event which the believers in Jesus celebrated beginning at midnight on the night of the 15th of Nissan. Apparently, to Melito, the *afikoman* became a symbol for Jesus, the new savior. Is it then possible that the Mishnaic prohibition against eating the *afikoman* alludes to the Christian celebration which began at midnight, and was meant to keep Jews who had finished the feast from leaving their group and moving on to join a group Christians who were just beginning it? Are the Talmudic interpretations offered for the word *afikoman* a later attempt to obscure the original meaning?

The wording of the Mishnah appears to refer to the paschal sacrifice, which would mean that the prohibition against eating the *afikoman* pre-dates

the destruction of the Temple. It is also possible that Melito, who visited the Land of Israel, learned of the Mishnaic prohibition against eating the *afikoman* and endowed it with a new, christological meaning.

These options pave the way to a different understanding of the answer to the Wise Son. The prohibition against eating *afikoman* is designed to keep the Wise Son away from the Christians who, at a time when Jews have already concluded the Seder, are feasting to celebrate the salvation Jesus brought the world. In my book *Two Nations in Your Womb*, I argued that the “wicked” son of the Haggadah who repudiates the commandments of the Torah and asks “What do you mean by this service?” is a Christian. In the same vein, it can be argued that the answer to the “wise” son is meant to keep him away from Christian customs, in view of the urgent Jewish need to keep apart from them. The struggle was not played out only on the city streets, but first and foremost inside the home. This is the reason for the important place given at the Seder to educating children as well as the victorious design for the evening being a telling of the story of the exodus from Egypt rather than the study of Passover rules. Passover eve was the most perilous point of time in the rivalry between Judaism and Christianity in the first centuries.

According to custom, which is still in place to this day, early on in the Seder, one takes the middle matzah from a pile of three, breaks it in half, wraps one of the halves in a piece of cloth and hides it away (*tzafun*). At the end of the Seder, that matzah is brought back to the table and eaten

as the *afikoman*. In my above-mentioned book I've already argued that this custom bears a similarity to the rituals of the Eucharist in the Christian mass. Like the matzah, the Catholic sacramental bread of the Eucharist is made from unleavened dough. On Good Friday, the day of Jesus' crucifixion, the consecrated bread – which symbolizes or transubstantiates into the body of Christ (*Corpus Christi*) – is placed in a “tomb” (*sepulchrum*) after being wrapped in a cloth (*sudarium*). This ritual, which symbolizes the burial of Jesus, is called *depositio*. During mass on Easter Sunday, the day on which Christians commemorate Jesus's resurrection, the Eucharist is brought back to the altar in a ceremony that marks the raising of Jesus from the dead (*elevatio*).

The *afikoman* serves as the Jewish parallel to the Christian host, be it as parody or rival. Whereas the Christian Eucharist symbolizes the body of Jesus, the Jewish *afikoman* symbolizes the messiah. According to Jewish legend, the messiah was born when the temple was destroyed and will be revealed at some future time. That is why the *afikoman* is called *tzafun* (hidden). Medieval Jews “responded” with a ritual of their own in which they considered the *afikoman* consecrated bread, and eating it a religious commandment. It may even be that the choice of using the middle matzah as *afikoman* is an allusion to the Christian story of the crucifixion, in which Jesus was flanked on either side by a crucified Jewish thief. What does the custom of letting the children steal the *afikoman* mean? According to the New Testament, Jesus died shortly before the Sabbath began, so there was not enough time to bury him,

and his body was placed temporarily in a cave. The Jews asked that the entrance be closed “lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away” (Matth 27,64) and then claim that he has risen from the dead. *Sefer Toledot Yeshu* (the History of Jesus), a Jewish version of the gospel, relates that Judas Iscariot stole the body in advance and buried it in his garden so that he could refute claims by believers that Jesus was supposedly resurrected.

It follows that the children stealing the *afikoman* are actually taking part in a Jewish play that is something of a counter-response to the Christian Passion play. Why children? Perhaps, as is commonly believed, to make sure that they stay awake till the end of the Seder. Or perhaps they were chosen to mitigate the harshness of the impression such a parody of the Christian narrative could engender.

The language of ritual has multi-layered meanings; anthropologist Victor Turner called this “the forest of symbols”. The historian, like the anthropologist, tries to discover the hidden, ancient strata.

Aldegonde Brenninkmeijer-Werhahn (ed.)

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*Album Amicorum*

With contributions from:

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