



The Passover between the Old and New Testament

A Patristic Overview



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St. Melito, Bishop of Sardis, believes that the Law was an introduction to the covenant of grace, not only through commandments and words, but also through the symbol saying, “The words and acts of the rite, brethren, are meaningless, if they are severed from what they symbolize.” This is actually the view of the church that it received, with an evangelical Spirit, since the beginning.

And now, let us speak about the rite of the Passover, as it came in the book of Exodus, and what it symbolizes, with the help of biblical texts and writings of the fathers.

1-Why did it happen by night?

The Lord says to Moses: “*About midnight I will go out into the midst of Egypt*” (Exodus 11:4). And He confirms in the Book of Deuteronomy: “*For in the month of Abib, the Lord your God brought you out of Egypt by night*” (Deuteronomy 16:1). St. Hippolytus interprets this by saying, “The strike took place by night in darkness as in the veil of darkness, away from the bright light of the day, justice is realised in the devil and his crimes. “*And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth: blood and fire with pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord,*” (Joel 2:30,31) and “*Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! For what good is the day of the Lord to you? It will be darkness, and not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him! Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light? Is it not*

very dark, with no brightness in it? (Amos 5:18-20).”

2 - In the month of Abib, the beginning of months

The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron saying, “*This month shall be your beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you*” (Ex. 12:1). It is as though, with every Passover, they enter a new year, to live in a continuous state of renewal within the heart, through the slain Jesus Christ.

As the Lord Christ (our Passover) is the head of creation, and is its Firstborn, this month became the “firstborn” of ages, and the beginning of the new life. According to the words of the new apostle, “*Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life*” (Rom. 6:3, 4).

St Hippolytus says, “That means that the true sacrifice of Passover to us, is the beginning of eternal life.” The symbolic Passover came at the beginning of the months; but the Lord (the true Passover) came at the end of ages (Heb. 9:26), to proclaim that He is the end and goal of the Law (Rom. 10:4). It is noteworthy that the word “Abib” means a head of grains, as though, through Passover, the soul becomes the “head of grain” of the Lord, namely, His harvest.

3 - Taking the lamb on the tenth day of the month (Ex. 12: 3)

That was a reference to the entrance of the Lord Christ into Jerusalem, to be kept there, until He offers Himself a Passover for our sake. Choosing the tenth day refers to His coming after the Law (The Ten Commandments) to consummate the commandment that was broken by man, granting us the possibility of its fulfilment.

4 - Keeping it until the fourteenth day (Ex. 12: 6)

In the fourteenth day, the moon becomes full; for the sun is a symbol of the Lord Christ, and the moon of the Church. It is as though, through Christ (our Passover) (1 Cor. 5: 7), the enlightenment of the Church is consummated, and its splendour is proclaimed.

The days of keeping are five (10-15 of Abib), representing the five beginnings of the world, in the history of salvation. With it, Adam began the human race; Noah, began the new world after the great flood; Abraham began as a father to believers, (from whose seed came the people of God); Moses began the world in the written Law; and finally Christ came on the fifth day to begin the age of grace, in which He offered Himself a Passover, having its activity in all the five eras.

The five days also refers to the activity of the true Passover, for all those who work in any



of the five hours of the day; those who began their work in the first hour, the third, the sixth, the ninth, or the eleventh hour.

5 - Inviting the neighbour next to his house (Ex. 12: 4)

This refers to the invitation of the Gentiles, being the (next neighbour), to share in the enjoyment of the true Passover.

6 - The lamb should be without blemish (Ex. 12: 5)

It should either be a lamb, a symbol of meekness, according to the words of the prophet Isaiah, “He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearer is silent” (Isaiah 53: 7), or “a kid of the goats as a sin offering” (Numbers 7: 16).

The Saviour Lord Jesus Christ was called a Lamb, as in the Book of Jeremiah said, “I was like a docile lamb brought to the slaughter, and I did not know that they had devised schemes against Me, saying, ‘Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, and let us cut Him off from the land of the living, that His name may be remembered no more” (Jeremiah 11: 9). And as seen by St. John the Baptist, who said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1: 29). In heaven, St. John the evangelist saw Him, “In the midst of the elders, stood a lamb as though it had been slain” (Revelations 5: 6).

Being perfect and without blemish, is because of the Lord Christ, holy and without sin, is capable of atoning our sins by His own blood (Heb. 9: 14). And according to the Apostle, we have been redeemed by a perfect blood, as though of a lamb without a spot, the blood of Christ.

Being a male, that refers to His

status, as a Groom to all believers (2 Corinthians 11: 2); and “Who has the bride is the Bridegroom” (John 3:29).

Being “of the first year”, means that it should be young and strong; to stay new in our lives forever, though HE is the Old of age, the Eternal.

Because the Lord Christ alone without blemish or spot in every virtue, presents all righteousness, from the beginning to the end. Having said of Himself: “It is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15) St.Hippolytus

7 – The whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it (Ex. 12: 6)

On one side, this had been realised in the Person of the Lord Christ, of Whom it is said, “For truly against Your Holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together” (Acts 4: 27). On another side, the Lord Himself was the One who came forward to offer Himself as sacrifice of love for our sake. St. John Chrysostom says, “The Lord Christ was not commanded to do that, but came forward to offer Himself as a sacrifice to God.”

Despite the great number of families that offer lambs, yet all of them share in one sacrifice. The Lord Christ had offered Himself as One Passover, for the atonement of all nations and peoples gathering all around Hum, as though in one house. Concerning this, St. Hippolytus says, “As it was the case with the houses of the Hebrews, although numerous, yet counted as one house. Churches, though numerous in a city, they represent one Church. Christ, who is whole, is undivided in various houses, as is said by the apostle Paul, that we are one in

Christ.”

It should be kept inside the house. St. Hippolytus says, “It is one assembly and one house. It is one Church where the Holy Body of Christ is eaten. It is not to be moved out of that one house, or church. Whoever eats it in any other place, will be condemned as a wicked thief.”

8 – To be killed at twilight (Ex. 12: 6)

Is a reference to the fact that the Lord Christ has offered Himself for the world at the fulfilment of ages.

9 – The blood to be put on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses (Ex. 12: 7)

Speaking of the activity of the blood, He says, “When I see the blood, I will pass over you there is no remission” (Hebrew (9: 22)).

The Egyptians, no doubt have seen the slaying of the lambs and the sprinkling of the blood, and mocked the Israelites for it, but they perished. If any Hebrew had tied the lamb to the door, instead of slaying it, he would also perish, as there is no salvation for us, except through the death of the Lord Christ, and the shedding of His blood. That is why He says: “Most assuredly I say to you. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain” (John 12: 24).

The blood of the lamb was a symbol of the blood of the Lord Christ, without it, there is no salvation. And as St. Lactantius says, “The Hebrews were alone saved by the sign of the blood. Not because the blood of the lamb had in itself the activity to save mankind, but because it was a symbol of the coming things.”

St. Hippolytus says concerning the power of the sign of blood that “It is put on the houses as well as in the souls, where the Spirit of God finds its holy dwelling.” And he also says, “The blood on the upper lintel, namely on the Church; and on the two doorposts, namely on the two peoples (the Jews and the Gentiles).”

St. Gregory of Nyssa believes that putting the blood on the upper lintel and on the two doorposts refers to the sanctification of the three sides of the soul: the mental, the emotional, and the spiritual. Man is sanctified with all his mental energies, desires, emotions, and inner feelings.

So, it was the belief of the fathers, as far as the sign of blood is concerned, that it implies the sanctification of the catholic, or global Church, as well as the human soul, as a member in that Church.

It is noteworthy that the blood is not to be put on the doorstep, lest it would be trampled over with feet. The apostle says, “*Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be though worthy, who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant, by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?*” (Hebrew 10:29). As to our strife to enjoy the fruit of the that blood, St. Athanasius says, “It is fitting for us to prolong our prayers, fasts, and watching, so that we can anoint the doors of our houses with the precious blood, to let the destroyer pass over them.”

God does not allow the paschal lamb to be

sacrificed in any other place than where His Name is invoked (that is in the Temple at Jerusalem; Due. 16: 5-6), for He *knew* that there would come a time, after Christ’s Passion, when the place in Jerusalem (where you sacrificed the paschal lamb) would be taken from you by your enemies, and then all sacrifices would be stopped.

St. Justin

Although, as a sheep he was led to the slaughter (Isaiah 53:7; Acts 8:32), yet He was not a sheep; although as a lamb, speechless, yet neither was He a lamb for the model indeed existed, but then the reality appeared. For instead of the lamb there was a Son; and instead of the sheep, a Man; and in the Man, Christ, who has comprised all things (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3).

Melito of Sardis

10 – Use of a bunch of hyssop (Ex. 12. 22)

“And you shall take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is the basin, and strike the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood...” (Ex. 12: 22) The scholars could not reach a definite view about hyssop; however the traditional one is that it is the ‘Zaatar’ plant. This plant was used, according to the Holy Book, to purify the leprosy (Leviticus 14: 4, 6) and from sin (Ps. 51: 7), for ritual purification (Numbers 19: 6, 18), and was also used to lift up a



sponge filled with sour wine, and presented to the Lord Christ on the cross (John 12: 29). It is said that hyssop is an aromatic plant that grows on walls and rocks.

St. Augustine believes “that hyssop, although a weak and lowly weed, yet has deep and strong roots. It is as though it penetrates with its roots deep into love, *“to comprehend with all the saints what is the width, length, depth, and height (of love)”* (Eph. 3: 17: 18), and to recognise the cross of our Lord.” Through the blood, springing from the limitless love, we are sanctified, we destroy the leprosy of sin, receive healing from all of our sicknesses, our souls are purified, and we share with Christ His passion on the cross.

11 - To eat it “roasted in fire” (Ex. 12: 9)

- A. The rite does not stop at the splattering of blood, but the believers should eat the flesh of the lamb, roasted in fire to unite with the Lord Christ, who went through the divine justice, as through fire.
- B. We should not stop at believing in the suffering Lord Christ, who passed through fire for our sake, but we should also partake of the communion of His body and blood shed for us, so as to have the fellowship of His Passion, to recognise the power of His resurrection, and to abide in Him and He in us.
- C. St. Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, believes that the food of the Passover is “the hot and flaring faith.” The scholar Origen also says about it, “Let us have the hot Spirit, and get hold of the fiery words presented to us by God, as He did with the prophet Jeremiah, saying to him: *‘Behold, I will make My words in your mouth dire’* (Jer. 5: 14). Let us make sure that the flesh of the lamb is well cooked,

so that those who partake of it would say with the two disciples of Emmaus, *‘Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?’* (Luke 24: 32)

- D. It was the custom to roast the lamb on two crossing iron bars that symbolize the cross. Thus, Justin Martyr says that the roasting was a symbol of the cross by shape.

12 - “Do not eat raw, nor boiled at all with water” (Ex. 12: 9)

He wants us to enjoy the divine Word flaming with fire, and not to eat it raw nor boiled with water – not to receive it with lukewarm attitude (like water), but with a hot spirit, serious in enjoying it. He wants us to receive faith through the cross and Passion, not by a loosely spirit.

13 - “Its head with its legs, and its entrails” (Ex. 12: 9)

As we eat our new Passover, we enter into the head, the feet, and the entrails. We recognise the love of Christ with the hope of comprehending its height (head), its depths (feet), and its width (entrails), and we shall find it surrounding us from all sides.

St. Hippolytus, the Roman believes that the head is the Law that revealed the “secret of the Passover”, the feet are the disciples, who preached peace on the mountains of Zion, while the entrails are the Passover itself that we came to know through the Law and the Bible.

14 - “With unleavened bread” (Ex. 12: 8)

The leaven refers to “malice and wickedness”(1 Corinthians 5: 7, 8), and to hypocrisy. That is why St. Ambrose advises us, saying, “If people (the Jews) celebrated the feast of the Passover by eating unleavened bread for seven days, every Christian is committed to eat of the body of the true lamb, Christ, and to lead a simple holy life all along the seven days, all the days of his life. Be careful to keep away of the old leaven, and do not remain in it, O brethren. According to the warning of the apostle, ‘Purge out the old leaven’ (1 Corinthian 5: 7), that is to say, purify yourself of it. If you kept yourself away from all the evil, so called the old leaven, and fulfilled by faith all your resolutions when you were baptised, then you will be true Christians.”



St. Athanasius, the apostolic, comments on the words of the apostle, “Let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Corinthians 5: 8)... “that you put off, concerning your former conduct... that you put on the new man which created according to God, in righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4: 22, 24), with meditations from God’s law day and night, with a humble mind and a pure conscience. Let us then, cast away from us every hypocrisy and deceit, get away from every pride and malice. Let us promise to love God and our neighbour and

become a new creation... we would then be celebrating the feast as we should.”

Some fathers like Origen believe that the old Passover was connected to the unleavened bread, so as to keep the believers from getting leavened by the leaven of the world anticipating the new leaven of the Kingdom of God (Mt. 13: 3).

It is noteworthy that the Lord Christ, in the sacrament of the Eucharist, used leavened bread, as He carried our sins in His body.

15 - “With bitter herb, they shall eat it” (Ex. 12: 8)

- A. St. Jerome believes that God forbid the use of honey in the offerings; yet, at the same time, commanded eating the lamb of Passover on bitter herb, as though He does not want us to lead a spoiled life, but bear the affliction in this world.
- B. The bitter herb reminds the people of the bitterness of servitude, from which they are set free through the lamb of Passover.
- C. The bitter herb refers to our commitment to approach the sacrament of the new Passover, with bitterness of heart and spirit because of our sins. When our mouth is embittered, because of sin, our heart would get filled with the sweetness of God’s body and blood. In other words, we do not enjoy the



sacrament of the Eucharist without repentance and confession.

16 “You shall let none of it remain until morning” (Ex. 12: 9)

A reference to the sacrament of the Passover was the secret of “the new life”. Our church is keen to let no divine sacrament remain to the next day.

17 – “Nor shall you break one of its bones” (Ex. 12: 46)

This refers to the Lord Christ, who, “when they came to Him, and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs” (John 19: 33. St. Hippolytus believes that, by this, we can recognise His resurrection (John 20:27). He carried the marks of several wounds, but it was not fitting for Him to rise the broken legs.

As the bones of the Lord were not broken, it is fitting for us to receive the “Word of God”, that we eat, enflamed with fire, yet without breaking its bones – to understand it, not in a killing human literal way, but through the constructive spirit.

And as the bones of the Passover are not broken, so also, the righteous, united with the Lord Christ, their Passover, will have their bones unbroken, as King David the Psalmist said, “He guards all their bones; not one of them is broken” (Psalm 34:20). And as St Augustine says, “The Psalmist does not mean the bones in the literal sense, but the unbreakable living faith, as we see from the incident of the right-hand robber, who although his feet bones were broken, yet the bones of his soul were kept by the Lord. In the moments of bitter affliction he abided in the faith, to be worthy to enter paradise, to be kept in the hands of God.”

18 – They will eat, ready to depart (Ex. 12: 11)

“You shall eat it: with a belt on your waist, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. So you shall eat it in haste; It is the Lord’s Passover” (Ex. 12: 11).

St. John Chrysostom says that this phrase has two interpretations:

- (1) A historical interpretation: to let the Jews take into consideration that they are going to depart; as though by so doing, they say, ‘We are ready to depart; we are going out of Egypt to the land of promise; we are departing’. As those people were known for their forgetfulness, He gave them that commandment to remind them of the goal of the Passover.
- (2) A symbolic interpretation: saying, “We also, as we eat the Passover, the Lord Christ (1 Corinthians 5:7)... we should eat it “with a belt on our waist, and sandals on our feet.”

Why? So we also may be ready to depart and rest. I wish everyone eats this Passover without looking down to Egypt (the world), but up to heaven, to the higher Jerusalem. Bracing with a belt is an indication of the departure of the soul. Listen to what God says to a righteous man: “Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me” (Job 38:3). That is what He also said to all prophets, and to Moses. The Lord Himself appeared in a similar way to Ezekiel, and the angels, being soldiers, appear likewise (Revelation 15: 6). Let us then brace ourselves and courageously stand. We should have no fear, because the Leader of our exodus is Jesus, and not Moses!

They were therefore, eating it, ready to depart and to pass over from the land of

bondage, heading to the land of promise; ready by their bodies (the belt), their hands (the staff), and their feet (the sandals). That is the same concept of getting ready to partake of the sacrament of the Eucharist; in having it, we yearn to pass over to where the Lord Christ is sitting.

The belted waist refers to controlling the body lusts, so man could walk, not according to desires of his body, but to those of the heavenly Spirit. That is why St. John Cassian, speaking of, why a monk braces his waist with a belt, he says, [So that the soldier of Christ, will have his mind ready to carry any work in the monastery; to have his movement unhindered by his clothes, and to comprehend that, using a belt made out of dead animal skin, implies his putting to death all his members, that contains the seeds of fornication and uncleanness, and in order to abide all the time in the commandments of the Bible, saying, *“Therefore put to death your members which are on earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry”* (Col. 3:5)].

The sandals on the feet refer to what happened with the prophet Moses, when he took off his sandals, made out of dead animal skin, in order to be able to enjoy the burning bush. But here, we put on sandals, made out of dead animal skin in order to be able to enjoy the burning bush. But here, we put on sandals of a different kind, that of the Lord, of which St. John, the Baptist said that he is not worthy to bow and loosen its straps. Therefore, let us have the sandals of the Lord, so that, as he walked, we do likewise, not fearing the thorns of this life, nor the violence and authority of Pharaoh, but to trample over all the forces of evil under our feet. And as St. Ambrose says, “Whoever celebrates the Passover of Jesus, and the lamb, should have his feet protected against

the fierce spiritual beasts, and the stings of the serpent.”

The staff in our hands is the rod of God, also called the rod of Moses, and the rod of Aaron. We lean on the power of God for salvation (the cross), hold the rod of Commandment (Moses), and practice the spiritual worship (Aaron). Some fathers see in the staff, the hope on which the soul leans, on her way to heaven, to cast away destructive threats of the devil, as a traveller does to chase away dogs with his staff.

Finally, St. Athanasius, the apostolic, speaks of the readiness to that trip, saying, “Our Lord Jesus Christ is the true light, who is our royal staff, and in place of the unleavened bread, is the bread descending from heaven. And in short, the Lord leads us, by all that, to His Father.”

As eating it in haste (Ex. 12: 11), St. Hippolytus says, “Whoever approaches that great and exalted body, should be watching and fasting,” he should be ready to set forth.

19 – “You shall keep it as a feast to the Lord throughout your generations” (Ex. 12: 14)

As a confirmation of the eternal Passover and also, so that the old people would remain anticipating for the coming of the true Passover, whose blood will be forever sanctified.



The Passover between the Old and New Testament

20 - “No outsider shall eat it” (Ex. 12: 43, 48)

No uncircumcised should take part of it, only the circumcised. Therefore, nobody can enjoy communion of the holy sacraments, except he who gained the spiritual circumcision, the Baptism by which he became a son to God, having the right to unite with Him in Christ Jesus.

In his fourth on the resurrection, St. Athanasius, the apostolic, says, “The deceitful person, with impure heart, and undefiled soul... is surely foreigner to the saints, and counted unworthy of eating the Passover while plotting a deceit against the Saviour, he turned as a foreigner to the city up high and a stranger to the apostolic company. The Law commanded that the Passover should be eaten with fitting caution, yet Judas, while eating it, the devil entered his soul (John 13: 27)

21 - “It is the Lord’s Passover” (Ex. 12: 11)

The Holy Book differentiates between the “Lord’s Passover”, and the “Jews’ Passover.” In the Law, He does not say “Your Passover” or “The Jews’ Passover”, but He says “The Lord’s Passover” in reference to Himself. But when the people fell to evil, and lived without repentance, He refers it to them, saying: “*The new moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies - I cannot endure... Your new moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates*” (Isaiah 1: 13, 14).

The scholar Origen noticed that this thing happens with all sorts of worship, calling the Sabbath, “the Lord’s Sabbath”, and in the Book of Numbers, He says: “*My offering, My food for My offerings made by fire as a sweet aroma to Me, you shall be careful to offer Me at their appointed time*” (Numbers 28: 1). He also called the people “My people”,

yet when they deviated from worshipping Him, He said to Moses: “*Go, get down, for your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves*” (ex. 32: 7).

It is no longer the people of God, but that of Moses.

22 - Killing the firstborns

- A. The scholar Tertullian believes that the Egyptians have paid the price of what they have done to the Hebrew children by throwing them in the river. The Lord punished them by their own deeds.



- B. God allowed all the firstborns to be killed, even those of the beasts with no exception. That is a symbol of God’s work in devastating evil. Yet His children, even the hairs of their heads are counted under His care.
- C. St. Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, sees in killing of the firstborns as a reference to the destruction of every cause of sin, saying, “It is fitting for whoever seizes

evil through virtue, to destroy it since its onset. By this he destroys every thing that would follow. That is what the Lord teaches us in the Bible, inviting us, very clearly, to kill the firstborns of evil... instructing us to destroy lust and anger, and not to be afraid before the sins of adultery and murder. Those two do not come all of a

sudden, but the anger produces murder, and the lust gives birth to adultery... thus by destroying the firstborns (lust and anger), we kill all that would follow. If we take the serpent as an example, by crushing its head, all of its body would be killed at the same time.”