

The Egyptian Hallel (Psalms 113-118)

We can be confident that Jesus prayed the psalms, all of the psalms. He was a teacher; he was Jewish; and he was *Torah* observant. He likely knew the psalms by heart, and they formed and informed his prayers. While Jesus certainly prayed the psalms, in general we cannot be certain of the specific psalms he prayed on specific occasions, with one exception – the Egyptian Hallel (Psalms 113-118). Designated for use during the Passover, this collection of six psalms recounts the Exodus story and gives thanks for God’s mighty deliverance. As a boy, Jesus heard and later recited these psalms every year at Passover growing up in his home. He sang them each time his family made the trip to Jerusalem for the festival. However, it is his last Passover that is the focus of this study, the Passover meal he shared with the twelve disciples on the night he was betrayed.

The Jews were commanded to observe the Passover meal yearly from the time of its origin on the night before the Exodus from Egypt. The details of the meal are described in Exodus 12, and the Israelites are commanded to celebrate their deliverance from slavery in Egypt with this meal for generations to come: “This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD—a lasting ordinance” (Exodus 12:14). The meal continues to be shared in Jewish homes each spring to this day, and the content of the meal has not changed substantially over the millennia.

The traditional order, or *seder*, of the Jewish Passover meal is structured around four cups. The drinking of each cup signifies a different movement in the meal. The following is a brief description of the actions that follow the drinking of each cup:

1. The Cup of Sanctification

–The washing of hands

This served a practical hygienic purpose since the food was shared without utensils. It also held symbolic significance as an act of setting the meal apart from all other meals.

–Eat green vegetables dipped in saltwater

The meal took place in the spring and green vegetables were a reminder of life returning to the earth. The saltwater reminded them of the tears of their ancestors shed while enslaved in Egypt.

–The four questions:

A child rises to ask four questions about the unique aspects of the meal.

Q: Why do we eat unleavened bread?

A: There was no time for the bread to rise because we left Egypt in haste

Q: Why do we eat bitter herbs?

A: To remind us of the bitterness of slavery

Q: Why do we dip twice? (once in the bitter herbs and once in the sweet fruit)

A: Our bitterness is lessened by the sweetness of our freedom

Q: Why do we eat reclining?

A: We are no longer slaves. We are a people at rest.

–The story of the Passover

Someone tells the story of the Exodus from Egypt

2. The Cup of Plagues

–The Ten Plagues are recited

The plagues are recited to remind the faithful that the Egyptians suffered as well under the plagues, and our cup of joy is lessened to some extent by the suffering of others.

–Drink the cup

–Eat the Passover meal

A lamb was roasted and served. It was a time of celebration and abundant feasting, a real treat for the majority of the people who lived very simple lives.

–Eat the “dessert”

Earlier in the evening, one of the three pieces of unleavened bread (*matzah*) is wrapped in a cloth and hidden for the children to find at this point in the meal. When one of the children has found the *matzah*, the “dessert” after the meal, it is ransomed by the host of the meal who retrieves it and shares it with the family. (This later was understood by messianic Jews as a picture of the resurrection of Jesus -- his body taken, wrapped in a cloth, hidden, and then surprise! -- he’s alive.)

3. The Cup of Salvation

–This is the cup “after the supper” with which Jesus identified himself. He calls it “the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for you.” (Luke 22:20)

A place has been set at the table for Elijah and the door is opened to invite him to come in and join the feast. Elijah was carried away to heaven in a chariot of fire, and the belief was that he would come back and usher in the Messiah (based on Malachi 4:5,6). Jesus identifies John the Baptist as “the Elijah who was to come.” (Matthew 11:14)

4. The Cup of Praise

-- The faithful sing a psalm of thanksgiving and drink the cup

-- All say, “Next Year in Jerusalem!”

The meal concludes with this statement of hope that messiah will come and God’s scattered people will be gathered in Jerusalem for the next Passover.

Of the six Hallel psalms, it was customary to recite the first two (113-114) before the meal and the remaining four (115-118) after the meal. One of these is likely the hymn referred to by the gospel writers who state that after the supper, “when they had sung a hymn, they went to the Mount of Olives.” (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26)

In reading these six psalms, it is helpful to envision how Jesus and his disciples would have experienced them. Psalm 113 declares God’s concern for the poor and the barren woman (a hallmark of Jesus’ ministry). Psalm 114 recounts the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea and the figurative birth of the nation. Psalm 115 is a polemic against idolatry, which is essentially what the ten plagues served to prove in Egypt. Psalm 116 is a prayer for deliverance from death, particularly significant when placed on the lips of Jesus on the night before his passion. Psalm 117 is a brief doxology and Psalm 118 is the testimony of one who has been rescued from death.

Each of these psalms in their own way takes on special significance in the context of the Last Supper. As I have meditated on these psalms in connection with Jesus the messiah, it has been helpful to see the connection of each psalm to one of the four cups of the Passover meal. The following is one possible way that each of the psalms may have served a liturgical function in the course of the meal. There is no tradition that establishes this connection however.

Psalm 113 serves as an introduction to the meal. It states the nature of Jesus' ministry as one who turns things upside down. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap (113:7) and seats them with princes. Even the phrase that describes YHWH as one "who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth" suggests the humiliation involved in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

It's possible to connect Psalm 114 with the *cup of sanctification*, setting apart the meal as unique in its remembrance of deliverance past. This Psalm tells the Exodus story, highlighting the crossing of the sea and God's provision in the wilderness. It is no ordinary meal, just as the Exodus was no ordinary, natural migration of a people from slavery to freedom. There is a supernatural element that sets the experience apart from all others.

Psalm 115 corresponds with the *cup of plagues* as it calls the faithful to worship the all-powerful YHWH who "does whatever pleases him" (115:3). This is in contrast to the idols of men who are absolutely impotent. This is a reminder of how the ten plagues demonstrated the impotence of the gods of Egypt -- each of the plagues corresponding to a specific Egyptian god.

Psalm 116 refers to the *cup of salvation* which is mentioned in verse 15, "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD." It is a prayer for deliverance from death that includes strong confidence that the psalmist's prayer will be heard. It is not difficult to see how this prayer is very fitting for Jesus in the hours before he faces his own death.

Psalm 117 is the psalm that corresponds to the *cup of praise* at the conclusion of the meal. It is a brief doxology that expresses the essential nature of the YHWH, "great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever."

Psalm 118 then could be the hymn that Jesus and his disciples sang before going to the Mount of Olives to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. The 118th psalm is widely regarded as a messianic psalm with a particular emphasis on the rejection of the messiah and his subsequent role as the "cornerstone". He becomes the cornerstone because he has not been given over to death. (118:18).

This perspective on the Egyptian Hallel and the Last Supper is somewhat speculative in the sense that we have no way of knowing which psalms were actually sung at each part of the meal. However, it is safe to assume that they were sung in the order in which they occur in the text. Regardless of the order and correspondence to the cups of Passover, we can be sure that they were sung at some point during the Last Supper, and they were undoubtedly on the minds of the Jewish people throughout the week of Jesus' passion. Careful reflection on these psalms sheds light on the thoughts of Jesus as he faced his suffering, death, and resurrection.