"HOLY THURSDAY AFTER THE HOLOCAUST"

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ABSTRACT

The Holy Thursday Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper relies heavily on language and imagery borrowed from the Jewish festival of Passover. This borrowing has become increasingly problematic after the Holocaust. It leads to supersessionism, and it does not take account of how the meaning of Passover has changed since the time of Jesus, sometimes as the direct result of Christian persecution. This article examines the three readings from the Mass of the Lord's Supper as well as the responsorial psalm in order to show how Catholic interpretations of Passover differ from Jewish ones. It suggests that the difference both can be harmful and is unnecessary.

I. Introduction

The season in the Catholic calendar known as the Easter Triduum begins on Holy Thursday with the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper. This ritual formally commemorates Jesus's last meal with his disciples and relies heavily on language and imagery borrowed from the Jewish festival of Passover. What this article hopes to show is how this borrowing has become increasingly problematic after the Holocaust.

This borrowing is problematic first because by adopting elements of Jewish tradition, Catholicism has also frequently understood itself as having superseded Judaism. As Franklin Littell has pointed out, it is a short step from deeming a religion superfluous to deeming those who practice it to be superfluous as well.[1]

It is also problematic because Judaism has undergone significant transformations since the time of Jesus and the meaning of Passover has undergone significant transformations as well. Not to take account of this fact is to freeze Judaism in the past and to view it as merely a fossilized religion.

Finally, it is problematic because some of the transformations that Judaism has undergone have been the direct result of Christian anti-

[1]Franklin Littell, *The Crucifixion of the Jews* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 30.

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Semitism. When Catholics invoke Passover symbols and images, they should be aware that when medieval Jews told the story of the Exodus, they did so by comparing the evil Pharaoh to the marauding Catholic crusaders who slaughtered entire Jewish villages. Catholics should know that it was shortly after the first crusades that the section of the Haggadah in which Jews beg God, "Pour Your anger and Your wrath on the heathen nations that do not know You and the sinful kingdoms that do not call Your name"[2] was first included.[3] And, of course, Catholics need to confront the fact that, post-Holocaust, the phrase "Angel of Death" no longer refers simply to the spirit who, according to tradition, slew the first-born of the Egyptians at God's behest. It now also revives the memory of the devout Catholic doctor Josef Mengele[4] who stood on the platform at Auschwitz and decided which Jews would be gassed immediately and which would instead be worked to death as slaves.

In sum: the Holy Thursday liturgy relies on a rich history of symbols and images. The point of this article is to demonstrate that, post-Auschwitz, that history is more complex and far more troubling than might be apparent.

II. Jesus and the Passover: Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14

The readings for the Mass of the Lord's Supper are the same each year. The first connects the sacrifice of Jesus with the sacrifice of the lamb at Passover. The psalm that follows offers thanks for the many gifts that God has bestowed and explains how to interpret the deaths of God's faithful ones. The second reading extends the connection made between the Passover and the Eucharist, the ritual which Catholics believe makes present once again the offering Jesus made. Finally, the Gospel reading tells the story of Jesus's washing of the disciples' feet.

The first reading comes from the Book of Exodus, recalling the night of the first Passover when God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The text's purpose in the liturgy is to associate the sacrifice of Jesus with the sacrifice of the Passover lambs; just as the lambs' blood was shed to save the Israelites from death, so the analogy goes, Jesus's blood was shed to save the world from death.

The story of the first Passover is well known. The portion of Scripture read at the Mass of the Lord's Supper includes God's instructions to Moses and Aaron:

[2]Elie Wiesel, A *Passover Haggadah* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 94.

[3]Marc Saperstein, *Moments of Crisis in Jewish-Christian Relations* (London: SCM Press, 1989), 19.

[4]According to Robert Jay Lifton, "Mengele identified himself as a Catholic on all his official forms, rather than using the more favored Nazi category of 'believer in God'" (*The Nazi Doctors* [New York: Basic Books, 2000], 339).

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> Tell the whole community of Israel: On the tenth of this month every one of your families must procure for itself a lamb, one apiece for each household. . . . They shall take some of its blood and apply it to the two doorposts and the lintel of every house in which they partake of the lamb. . . . It is the Passover of the LORD. For on this same night I will go through Egypt, striking down every firstborn of the land, both man and beast, and executing judgment on all the gods of Egypt–I, the LORD! . . . Seeing the blood, I will pass over you; thus, when I strike the land of Egypt, no destructive blow will come upon you.[5]

The blood of the lambs brings protection to the houses of the Jews. Ultimately it brings the Israelites freedom from their Egyptian masters, as the power of God that passes over the land that night causes such widespread affliction that the pharaoh tells Moses to take his people and to go. This Moses does, but when the pharaoh changes his mind and pursues the fleeing slaves, God must intervene again to ensure that the escape is successful.

In Jewish life and thought, the memory of God's victory over Egypt is continually reshaped as the context in which the Passover is celebrated changes. Thus, for example, in the late Middle Ages, the Passover story was invoked as a plea for God to end the suffering of Jews at the hands of Christians. Praying in the fifteenth century, Akiva ben Eliezer recalled Jews who had been executed at Trent in northern Italy and he asked of God, "Execute revenge upon our enemies / in the near future, as when I left Egypt!"[6]

Likewise, and more directly relevant to our purposes, in contemporary Jewish life the celebration of Passover has been affected profoundly by the events of the twentieth century. Numerous works of art as well as modern versions of the Haggadah make the connection between Passover and the *Shoah*. Examining a few of these will provide some context for understanding the multiple connotations that Passover has today, and why it is important for Christians to be aware of these.

For example, a version of the Haggadah written shortly after the end of World War II questions God's role in history, asking why God did not intervene at Auschwitz as God had intervened in Egypt. *A Survivor's Haggadah*, composed by a Lithuanian Jew who had endured

[5]National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), *Lectionary for Mass: Study Edition*, vol. 1, *Sundays, Solemnities, Feasts of the Lord and the Saints* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 293-94. The text is from Exodus 12:3, 7, 11-13.

[6]Akiva ben Eliezer, *The Book of Tears* (in Hebrew), ed. Simon Bernfeld (Berlin, 1924), ii, 154; cited by David J. Malkiel, "Infanticide in Passover Iconography," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 56 (1993): 94.

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four years in concentration camps, offers a bitter rendering of the traditional *dayenu* ("it would have sufficed"), the prayer that offers thanks for God's redemption of the Israelites from slavery. The traditional version proclaims that it would have been enough if God had merely led the Jews through the desert without also providing manna; it would have been enough if God had fed them with manna without also giving the Sabbath; and so on. However, the Haggadah used in 1946 by the remnant Hitler did not have time to murder prays instead, "Had He scattered us among the nations but had not given us the First Crusade, we would have been content. . . . Had He given us the Inquisition but not the pogroms of 1648-49, we would have been content. . . . Had He given us gas chambers and crematoria, but our wives and children had not been tortured, we would have been content.[7] The Haggadah does not wait for an answer from God about why such atrocities were allowed to occur. It finishes the *dayenu* simply by vowing, "All the more so, since all these have befallen us, we must make *Aliyah* [emigration to Israel], even if illegally, wipe out the *Galut* [exile], build the chosen land, and make a home for ourselves and our children for eternity."[8] The question of why these events occurred is asked of God but is never answered.

A more contemporary version of the ritual meal also refuses to bring closure to the question of God's involvement in history. In *A Passover Haggadah*, Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel considers why the traditional Seder urges, "In every generation, every individual must feel as if he personally had come out of Egypt." The fact that the text does not say "every Jew" but rather "every individual" shows, says Wiesel, that the experience of the Jews is universal. He explains, "This lesson is especially relevant for those of our contemporaries who declare that all of us 'are survivors of the Holocaust.' No, all of us are not. . . . Only those who knew death in Auschwitz survived Auschwitz. But all of us should think and act 'as if' we had all been there."[9]

To think and act as if we had been in the Holocaust is to respond always with compassion, Wiesel says, and that includes compassion for one's enemies. Significantly, in the celebration of Passover one is prohibited from expressing glee at the defeat of the Egyptians. Neither the slaying of the first-born nor the drowning of Pharaoh's soldiers in the Red Sea is recalled as a cause for joy. Numerous midrashim stress that God had given the Egyptians many opportunities to repent before visiting the last, most terrible plague upon them. For example, one

[7]Yosef Dov Sheinson, *A Survivor's Haggadah*, ed. Saul Touster (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2000), 63.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Wiesel, *A Passover Haggadah*, 68-69.

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reminds, "Despite all the lashings of punishment which the Holy One, blessed be He, inflicted upon the Egyptians in order to cleanse them of evil, so that the Egyptians would let Israel go from their midst . . . the Egyptians did not consent to let them go. When did they let them go? After . . . the smiting of the first-born."[10] Another midrash explains that when the Red Sea swallowed up Pharaoh's men, "The ministering angels wanted to chant their hymns, but the Holy One, blessed be He, said, 'The work of my hands is being drowned in the sea, and shall you chant hymns?'"[11] According to Jewish tradition, at the recitation of each plague during the Seder meal, a few drops of wine are spilled to remind the celebrants that their joy came at the cost of others' suffering. Likewise, while on the first two nights of Passover six psalms are sung in praise of all that God has done, during the rest of the festival this Hallel is shortened as a mark of mourning for the Egyptians.[12]

Passover thus seems to be a festival of contradictions: joy at liberation, and sorrow at the suffering that led to it; proclamations that God saves God's people, and, especially post-Holocaust, memories of when God did not. Wiesel sees these contradictions as at the heart of Jewish faith. Reflecting on how the meaning of the holiday has changed for him as a result of his experiences in the camps, he writes, "Do I love it less than before? No. Let's just say I love it differently. Now I love it for the questions it raises, which are, after all, its *raison d'être*."[13] Passover is now, if it was not always, more of a question than an answer.

This becomes even clearer when one considers that the story of the Passover has in Jewish literature and lore been linked with Abraham's near-slaying of Isaac in Genesis 22. (It should be pointed out that the Passover Haggadah itself does not make this connection.) According to Genesis 22, God told Abraham to slaughter his son as a sacrificial offering. Abraham complied with this directive and prepared to kill Isaac, but at the last moment God intervened and directed him to a ram instead. In his classic commentary on this text entitled *The Last Trial*, Shalom Spiegel reports an ancient tradition in which the Akedah (the binding of Isaac by Abraham to ready him for slaughter) took place in the same month as did the redemption of Israel from Egypt generations later. Spiegel argues that the Book of Jubilees, a Jewish text probably written in the second century BCE, makes the same connection.[14] Other

[10]In William G. Braude, trans., *Pesikta Rabbati: Discourses for Feasts, Fasts, and Special Sabbaths*, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), Piska 49.3, 833.

[11]Megillah 10b. See Maurice Simon, trans., I. Epstein, ed., *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud* (London: Soncino Press, 1984).

[12]Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way* (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 53-54, 58.

[13]Wiesel, *A Passover Haggadah*, 6.

[14]Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial* (New York: Pantheon, 1967), 56.

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scholars doubt Spiegel's conclusion and believe that Judaism associated the Passover with the Akedah somewhat later, in the late second century CE.[15] Nonetheless, from at least that point on the association became common.

Like the Passover, the Akedah is also not remembered in Jewish tradition as an occasion for unmitigated joy. Tradition says that after his ordeal was over, Abraham was angry with God for ordering the death of Isaac. He wanted to know why God, who surely knew beforehand how events would unfold, would test him in such a manner. God responded that of course the outcome was already known to the divine mind, but that human beings also had to be shown Abraham's worthiness. This answer did not satisfy Abraham, however, and he demanded that God hear him out. "I might have reproached Thee," he tells God, "[b]ut I refrained myself, and I said nothing." In return for his forbearance, Abraham requires that God be equally patient with the trespasses of future generations. God agrees to this and promises that in years to come, if Abraham's children blow a ram's horn on New Year's Day and ask for pardon, then God, remembering the ram that was substituted for Isaac as a sacrifice, will forgive them.[16] In this tradition, even God seems to recognize that human sacrifice is beyond the pale.

As we saw earlier, the meaning of the Passover story acquired different shadings depending on the context in which it was read; so too the meaning of the Akedah. For example, in the Middle Ages, Jews drew on Genesis 22 to describe their suffering at the hands of Christians. When the Jews of Mainz were attacked by Christian crusaders, some of them chose to be killed by their own friends or family rather than submit to death (or baptism) at the hands of the marauders. Later, Solomon bar Simson described the carnage at Mainz:

> Let the ears hearing this and its like be seared, for who has heard or seen the likes of it? Inquire and seek: was there ever such a mass sacrificial offering since the time of Adam? Did it ever occur that there were one thousand and one hundred offerings on one single day—all of them comparable to the sacrifice of Isaac, the son of Abraham?[17]

To die for the unity of God's name (i.e., the *Shema*: "Hear, Israel, the

[15]P.R. Davies and B.D. Chilton, "The Aqedah: A Revised Tradition History," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40 (1978): 536.

[16]Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 1, *From the Creation to Jacob* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1937), 284-85. The material in Ginzberg is largely derived from *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* 56.8-10. See Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah*, vol. 2 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 284-86.

[17]Solomon bar Simson, *The Chronicle of Solomon bar Simson*, in Shlomo Eidelberg,

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Lord is our God, the Lord is One") was to offer oneself for God in the same way that Isaac was offered. And yet such offerings were tragedies that called not for rejoicing but rather for cries to heaven. Solomon bar Simson reproaches God for not doing more to prevent the murders of Jews by Christians: "Wilt Thou restrain Thyself for these things, O Lord? It was for You that innumerable souls were killed! May You avenge the spilt blood of your servants, in our days and before our very eyes—Amen—and speedily!"[18]

Just as the memory of the Holocaust has been incorporated into contemporary interpretations of the Passover, so it has affected modern portrayals of the Akedah as well. In many post-Holocaust works the Akedah is both honored as a trial of faith and mourned as an omen of the many slaughters to come. For example, Jacob Glatstein, who was born in Lublin, Poland and whose parents were murdered in the Holocaust, composed a poem called "My Father Isaac" in which he imagines an elderly Isaac being led to sacrifice. This time, however, "No good angel came flying; / the flames burned more brightly and higher." Nonetheless, as the old man dies, he calls out "in a tired voice: 'Here I am—prepared to be your ram.'"[19] There is no joy in the poem, but rather what might be termed steadfast resignation: obedience unto death.

Like Jews, Christians have also linked Passover with the sacrifice of Isaac. However, they have gone a step further and linked both events with the death of Jesus. Carol Delaney points out that some early Christians used the Passover/Akedah association to confirm that Jesus, who was killed at Passover, was truly the Messiah.[20] Indeed, the interpretation of Isaac as a "type" or forerunner of Christ goes back nearly to the inception of Christianity. Clement of Alexandria, writing at the end of the second century, made the comparison:

> He [Isaac] was a son, just as is the Son (he is the son of Abraham; Christ, of God); he was a victim, as was the Lord. . . . All he did was to carry the wood of his sacrifice, just as the Lord bore the wood of the Cross. . . . Isaac did not actually suffer, not only to concede the primacy of suffering to the Word, but also to suggest, by not being

ed. and trans., *The Jews and the Crusaders: The Hebrew Chronicles of the First and Second Crusades* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 1996), 33.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Jacob Glatstein, "My Father Isaac," in David Curzon, ed., *Modern Poems of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994), 143-44.

[20]Carol Delaney, *Abraham on Trial* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 120, 144.

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> slain, the divinity of the Lord; Jesus rose again after His burial, as if He had not suffered, like Isaac delivered from the altar of sacrifice.[21]

Jesus, according to Clement, was the new Isaac who, like his predecessor, was sentenced to death by his own father. And like Isaac, Jesus emerged from the trial alive. In this view Jesus is not executed but rather is sacrificed, and the sacrifice ends not in the grave but in the salvation of the world.

The connection made in Christian thought between death and salvation troubles Elie Wiesel. In a commentary written on the Akedah entitled "The Sacrifice of Isaac: A Survivor's Story," Wiesel writes,

> In Jewish tradition man cannot use death as a means of glorifying God. Every man is an end unto himself, a living eternity; no man has the right to sacrifice another, not even to God. Had he killed his son, Abraham would have become the forefather of a people—but not the Jewish people. For the Jew, all truth must spring from life, never from death. To us, crucifixion represents not a step forward but a step backward. . . .

He continues, "To invoke the *Akeda* is tantamount to calling for mercy—whereas from the beginning Golgotha [where Jesus was crucified] has served as pretext for countless massacres of sons and fathers cut down together by sword and fire in the name of a word that considered itself synonymous with love."[22]

Wiesel is overstating the case when he says that in Jewish tradition one cannot use death as a way of glorifying God. Judaism in fact has a long tradition of *Kiddush haShem*, or the sanctification of the divine name through martyrdom. In the first few centuries of the Common Era, as Christians and Jews struggled to define themselves both in relation to each other and in the wake of the destruction of the Temple, Jewish portrayals of Isaac as a martyr began to proliferate, as did Christian interpretations of Jesus as the new Isaac. Some scholars suggest that the Passion narratives of Christians directly influenced the development of Akedah narratives in which Isaac is offered as an atoning sacrifice.[23] Others, such as Daniel Boyarin, suggest that since what came to be known as Christianity took hundreds of years to emerge as a religion distinct from Judaism, it is better to speak of "recirculating motifs, themes and religious ideas" rather than a clear line of origin and in-

[21]Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator*, trans. Simon P. Wood (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1954), 23.

[22]Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God* (New York: Summit Books, 1976), 76.

[23]Davies and Chilton, 537-40.

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fluence.[24] Boyarin agrees, though, that by the end of the third century a new model of martyrdom had evolved in rabbinic literature. In previous narratives, he says, "the martyr refused to violate his or her religious integrity and was executed for this refusal." In the third century, however, "we find martyrdom being actively sought as a spiritual requirement and as the only possible fulfillment of a spiritual need."[25]

Significantly, though, Boyarin also points out that martyrdom is not presented as an unmitigated good in these early rabbinic texts. He cites as an example the story of the execution in the second century C.E. of Rabbi Akiva as it is told in the Babylonian Talmud. When the rabbi is arrested by the Roman soldiery and is sentenced to death, his students question his resolve to die, asking, "Our teacher, so far[?]" Even the angels in heaven protest to God, "This is Torah, and this is its reward!?"[26] These voices do not prevent Akiva's martyrdom, but they do at least raise some doubts about its wisdom. Boyarin also considers two talmudic accounts of other rabbis arrested by the Romans, Rabbi El'azar the son of Perata and Rabbi Chanina the son of Teradyon. The former escapes death by tricksterism, and the latter is burned alive. However, Boyarin argues that the Talmud "never quite rules for tricksters or for martyrs."[27] Neither rabbi is presented as having the "correct" approach.

Even in later medieval accounts of martyrdoms, in which Jews are praised for choosing to die by their own hands rather than submit to baptism, those who take a different path merit approval. Solomon bar Simson writes, "It is now fitting to recount the praises of those who were forcibly converted. They risked their lives even in matters pertaining to food and drink. . . . He who speaks evil of them, it is as though he spoke thus of the Divine Countenance."[28]

By contrast, Christian tradition is nearly univocal. In Christian martyr tales the martyr dies in *imitatio Christi* and is the ideal follower of Jesus. In martyr tales in which the protagonist manages to avoid being seized by his or her persecutors, that escape is always followed by a return and a voluntary, deliberate and even joyful acceptance of death. Boyarin points in particular to the story of the martyrdom of Polycarp, who was executed in the second century. Polycarp, eighty-six years old by his own reckoning, was bishop of Smyrna when persecutions of Christians flared up. At first, at the urging of his friends, Polycarp fled the city for a farm in the country. His pursuers followed

[24]Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 118.
[25]Ibid., 114.
[26]Ibid., 106-07. The passage Boyarin cites is from Berakhot 61b.
[27]Ibid., 56.
[28]Solomon bar Simson, 68.

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him there, however, and they closed in on him during the night. At that point Polycarp could have made another escape, but he refused, saying, "God's will be done." After the arrest, the governor tried to persuade the prisoner to deny his Christian faith, but the old man held fast. Polycarp was then burned alive, praying amidst the flames, "'O Lord God Almighty. . . . I bless thee for granting me this day and hour, that I may be numbered amongst the martyrs, to share the cup of thine Anointed. . . .'"[29] Dying as Jesus had died was a privilege that Polycarp felt honored to receive.

Thus Wiesel's observation regarding how Jews and Christians assess the value of martyrdom, if a generalization, nonetheless touches on an important distinction. The difference perhaps can be found in the relation between the martyr's death and his or her life. Explains Eliezer Berkovits, "Continuing with 'the routine' of Jewish existence and ignoring the world that is bent on crushing the Jew is one of the marks of *Kiddush haShem*. Often it is practiced long before the hour of radical abandonment arrives."[30] Studying the death of Rabbi Akiva, what Berkovits finds most significant is not the rabbi's final moments themselves but rather how those moments were of a piece with the rest of his life. The martyrdom was only one step in a lifelong commitment, and its significance comes from the context in which it occurs: "The defiant No with which a man meets a tyrant or a persecuting church or a humiliating falsehood is itself a supreme act of living self-fulfillment. If it is done for the sake of God, in whose truth alone one finds self-affirmation, it is a heroic act of *Kiddush haShem*."[31]

Again, by contrast, Christians have frequently looked to the death of Jesus as both ordained by God and as a good in itself. The entrance antiphon for the Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper proclaims, "We should glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, for he is our salvation, our life and our resurrection; through him we are saved and made free."[32] Here the death of Jesus is not simply the result of his defiant assertion of dignity in the face of tyranny. It is rather an event willed by God for the salvation of the world, and it is the occasion for glorious celebration. Likewise, in a Preface said before the Eucharist at the Mass of the Lord's Supper, the presider prays, "He [Jesus] is the true and eternal priest who established this unending sacrifice. He offered himself as a victim for our deliverance and taught us to make this offering in his memory. As we eat his body which he gave for us, we

[29]*The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, in Maxwell Staniforth, trans., *Early Christian Writings* (New York: Penguin, 1968), 157, 160.

[30]Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust* (New York: KTAV, 1973), 83.

[31]Ibid., 81.

[32]National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), *The Sacramentary* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1985), 135.

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grow in strength. As we drink his blood which he poured out for us, we are washed clean."[33] Jesus' bloody death nourishes, cleanses and saves. It is a positive good rather than simply a heroic response to tragedy.

It is hard to reconcile that understanding of sacrifice with either the slaughter of the Passover lambs or the *Akedah*. In the story of Passover, God resorts to killing human beings only after having already visited nine plagues upon Egypt. The slaughter is a final resort, one last measure in the effort to free the Israelites. Moreover, the lambs killed on the eve of Passover are offered precisely as a way of lessening human bloodshed. Their sacrifice is not a joyous measure but an attempt to mitigate the terror that would sweep through Egypt that night. By interpreting Jesus's death as a Passover sacrifice that is, precisely because of its relation to Passover, a good in itself, Catholic tradition has changed the meaning of the Jewish festival in a way that is antithetical to how Judaism itself has interpreted it.

There are some notable exceptions to the Catholic tradition of seeing Jesus' crucifixion as a positive event that was divinely ordained. Those exceptions, in fact, provide opportunities for rethinking the death of Jesus in ways that are both more helpful and more credible in a post-Auschwitz world. What we can conclude thus far, however, is rather along the lines of the negative. If the Holy Thursday liturgy is going to utilize the imagery of Passover, it cannot do so in a way that is simplistic or naive. More, it cannot do so in a way that is unthinkingly supersessionist, taking over the "Old Testament" celebration of Passover and replacing it with New Testament meanings. Judaism has had a long tradition of wrestling with the notions of sacrifice, suffering, martyrdom and vicarious atonement, a tradition that did not end in the first century with the advent of Christianity. That tradition is complex and ambivalent and has become only more so since the Holocaust. If the Holy Thursday liturgy incorporates Passover imagery, it must do so in a way that takes into account how that festival has been shaped by the centuries of Christian persecution of Jews that ended in the Holocaust.

III. Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 116:12-13, 15-16bc, 17-18

In the Holy Thursday liturgy, the Psalm that is sung in response to the first reading contains the following verses: "How shall I make a return to the LORD for all the good he has done for me? The cup of salvation I will take up, and I will call upon the name of the LORD. Precious in the eyes of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones."[34]

[33]Ibid., 467.
[34]NCCB, *Lectionary for Mass*, 294. The text is from Psalm 116:12-13, 15.

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The translation of that last line (Psalm 116:15) is both significant and troublesome. Consider how three other sources render the text: 1) Precious in the sight of Yahweh// Is the faith/trust of his devoted ones (Michael Barré)[35]; 2) The death of His faithful ones is grievous in the LORD's sight (Jewish Publication Society); 3) Too costly in the eyes of the LORD is the death of his faithful (*New American Bible*). Obviously, translation makes an enormous difference in how one reads the psalm. It also makes a difference in how one understands the death of Jesus.

The problem for interpreters of this verse lies in an apparent contradiction within the psalm itself. Psalm 116 is a song of thanksgiving that praises God for delivering the author from death. In verse 6 the singer exults, "I was brought low and He saved me." In verse 8, "You [God] have delivered me from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling." It does not really make sense, then, that just a few lines later the text would portray death as something with positive value in the eyes of God. Rendering verse 15 as "Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones" seems to contradict the basic thrust of the song.

Aware of this problem, scholars have turned to other possibilities for interpreting the verse. Michael Barré, who translates the text as "Precious in the sight of Yahweh// Is the faith/trust of his devoted ones" thinks that the problem in the text is the result of scribal error. He argues that the Hebrew word for death, *hamāvĕtāh*, should instead be *hēmānûtāh*, or "trust, faith(fulness)."[36] The trust of God's faithful ones is precious in the eyes of the Lord.

Other scholars approach the problem of the verse differently. Unlike Barré, they accept that the noun in the text is "death" rather than "trust." However, they disagree that the adjective that describes the death of the faithful ones should be interpreted as "precious." At issue for them is the meaning of the Hebrew word *yāqār*. In many cases, *yāqār* does mean "precious." For example, in the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) translation of Proverbs, wisdom is described as being "more precious (*yĕqārāh*) than rubies" (3:15). The word can also mean "highly valued," as in I Kings 5:31, where the king orders that huge blocks of "choice" (*yĕqārôt*) stone be quarried. Why then does the JPS opt for "grievous" when it comes to Psalm 116:15?

The answer, again, lies in the context of the psalm itself. It simply does not make sense that after thanking God for sparing him from death, the psalmist would then say that death is "precious." The Jewish medieval scholar Rashi did not think so either. In his commentary on

[35]Michael L. Barré, "Psalm 116: Its Structure and Its Enigmas," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109/1 (1990): 72.

[36]Ibid.

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Psalm 116:15 he interpreted *yāqār* along the lines of 'grievous,' writing, "The Holy One Blessed be He showed me that it is a hard and serious matter in His sight to let His devotees die."[37] J.A. Emerton notes that the Aramaic cognate of *yāqār* took on several meanings in the ancient world, including "difficult," "heavy" and "burdensome." He concludes that therefore "it is plausible to translate *yāqār* as 'grievous' in Ps. cxvi.15, even though that meaning is not clearly attested elsewhere in Biblical Hebrew."[38]

Likewise, the New American Bible translation picks up on the same connotations of the word and translates *yāqār* as "too costly." Significantly, this is the version that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has placed on its web site. A footnote to the verse as it appears on the site explains that "the meaning is that the death of God's faithful is grievous to God, not that God is pleased with the death."[39]

And yet, in the Holy Thursday liturgy, the verse is translated as we saw above: "Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones." The reason for this is that the translation is derived from the Neo-Vulgate (*Nova Vulgata*), a Latin version of the Bible published under Pope John Paul II in 1979.[40] In the Neo-Vulgate, Psalm 116:15 is rendered as *"Pretiosa in conspectu Domini mors sanctorum eius*." It is only natural, then, that the English version of this text, the version approved for liturgical use, translates *yāqār* in line with *pretiosa* and thus as "precious."[41]

Natural, but unfortunate. As it stands, the use of Psalm 116 as the Responsorial song in the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday reinforces the idea that the death of Jesus was a good willed by God. The problem is not simply that the liturgy translates *yāqār* as "precious." Neither is the problem simply that the liturgy takes a Jewish psalm and applies it to Jesus. The problem is rather the combination of those two elements, in addition to the placement of the psalm between the first and second readings. The first reading, recall, tells the story of

[37]Rashi, in Mayer I. Gruber, ed., *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms* (Boston: Brill, 2004), 666.

[38]J.A. Emerton, "How Does the Lord Regard the Death of His Saints in Psalm cxvi.15?" *Journal of Theological Studies* 34 (April 1983): 153-54.

[39]See http:///www.nccbuscc.org/nab/bible/psalms/psalm116.htm.

[40]NCCB, *Lectionary*, *viii*.

[41]The current (1998) *Lectionary for Mass* employs the 1986 edition of the New American Bible's Revised New Testament and the 1970 edition of the Old Testament, including the Psalms. The New American Bible's translation of the psalms was updated in 1991, but this did not affect the text of the Lectionary. See the February-March, 1998 newsletter of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy at http://www.usccb.org/liturgy/innews/298.shtml. See also http://www.usccb.org/nab/faq.htm.

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the slaughter of the Passover lambs. The second reading, as we will see, tells the story of Jesus reflecting on his own impending death. Situating Psalm 116 between these two texts, the Holy Thursday liturgy's translation affirms the conviction that Jesus' death was a sacrifice required by God and approved by God. As Emerton points out, if death is precious, then "God regards the saints' death [*sic*] as valuable, which is most naturally understood to mean that he wants them to be killed. . . ."[42] It is this concept of salvation through sacrifice that, as we have seen, has only limited resonance in Judaism. Nonetheless, it is a notion that is at the heart of the next reading of the Mass of the Lord's Supper.

IV. The Eucharist: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

The second reading of the Holy Thursday liturgy is taken from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In his letter Paul tells the community in Corinth, "I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you.'" Likewise, says Paul, after the meal Jesus took a cup and said, "'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'" Paul concludes that every time the followers of Jesus eat the bread and drink from the cup, they "proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes."[43]

Scholars disagree about whether or not Jesus actually said the words that Paul attributes to him. Indeed, they disagree about whether or not anything like a "Last Supper" happened at all. John Dominic Crossan, for example, concedes that Jesus and his followers would certainly have shared a meal that, in retrospect, turned out to have been their last. He argues, however, that the accounts of that meal as they are found in Paul's letter and in the gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke do not derive from the historical Jesus.[44] He bases this claim on an analysis of the early Christian document known as the *Didachē*. The *Didachē*, says Crossan, contains two separate accounts of liturgies of the Eucharist. The first account "indicates a eucharistic meal with no ritualization of bread and wine/cup, let alone anything else." The second, later account (which Crossan dates to the late first century) does have a ritualization of the cup and the bread, but there is still "absolutely no hint of Passover meal, Last Supper, or passion symbolism built into its origins or development." Crossan concludes that since these elements

[42]Emerton, 150.

[43]NCCB, *Lectionary*, 295. The text is from I Cor 11:23-26.

[44]John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 360.

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were not included in the *Didache*'s description of the eucharistic meal, they do not go back to "solemn, formal, and final institution by Jesus himself."[45] They are, in other words, an interpretation placed on Jesus' actions by the early church.

John Meier disagrees. His primary argument is that accounts of the Last Supper are found in several different sources and that they therefore enjoy the backing of multiple attestation. As do most experts, Meier believes that the authors of Matthew and Luke relied in part on the gospel of Mark, and so their texts do not count as separate sources of information about the Last Supper. Nonetheless, Meier contends that the two accounts of Paul and Mark are good evidence that the memory of the Last Supper had a basis in fact. This conclusion is bolstered, he feels, by the Gospel of John's inclusion of Jesus's "bread of life" discourse in John 6:51-58.[46]

The question of the historical accuracy of the Last Supper cannot, of course, be settled here. However, I raise the issue for two reasons. The first is to present the possibility that what Catholics have come to think of as Jesus' institution of the Eucharist may have its origins rather in the life of the early church. If Crossan is correct, then some early Christians had no memory of a special injunction to eat the bread/body and to drink the wine/blood of Jesus. In addition, the eucharistic celebration of those early Christians made no mention at all of Jesus's death. The Eucharist was simply what the word implies: a thanksgiving. The emphasis was not on death but rather on gratitude for life. The *Didachē* instructs, "At the Eucharist, offer the eucharistic prayer in this way. Begin with the chalice: 'We give thanks to thee, our Father, for the holy Vine of thy servant David, which thou hast made known to us through thy servant Jesus'. . . . Then over the particles of bread: 'We give thanks to thee, our Father, for the life and knowledge thou hast made known to us through thy servant Jesus'."[47] It focuses not on the Passion but on the life and knowledge passed on by Jesus.

The second reason I have included the issue here is to emphasize that even if one accepts Meier's argument that at his last meal with his friends Jesus did perform a ritual in which he equated bread with his body, that ritual has undergone innumerable interpretations and reinterpretations ever since. Even Meier cautions that "we must appreciate that Last Supper and eucharist are not the same thing, pure and simple."[48] The Last Supper, he points out, took place in the presence of

[45]Ibid., 364.
[46]John P. Meier, "The Eucharist at the Last Supper: Did It Happen?" *Theology Digest* 42/4 (Winter 1995): 338, 343-44.
[47]*The Didachē*, in *Early Christian Writings*, no. 9, p. 231.
[48]Meier, 348.

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the earthly Jesus. The Eucharist, by contrast, remembers the earthly Jesus but also celebrates the risen Jesus and looks forward to Jesus' Second Coming. It is by definition a later reflection on the events of the Last Supper.

Meier shows how difficult it is to peel back layers of tradition to arrive at what Jesus *really* said and did. He contends, for example, that Paul's use of the phrase "new covenant" may not go back to Jesus himself but may rather reflect a later stage of Christian belief and practice.[49] Likewise, Paul's inclusion of the injunction, "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" was most likely not uttered by Jesus but was added by early Christians.[50] Meier also notes that in the accounts of both Paul and Luke, Jesus' actions with the bread and with the cup are separated by the meal itself, while Mark, on the other hand, places the two actions side by side. Mark also explicitly connects the wine with Jesus' blood "which is poured out for many" (14:24). Both of these Markan features, Meier feels, were later developments not present in the earliest memories of the Last Supper.[51]

Thus, even if we can assert with some degree of certainty that Jesus celebrated a last meal with his friends that was in some way special or distinctive (a claim that, again, Crossan disputes), there is very little that we can say about that meal with any historical confidence. Meier offers his version of what he believes to have been the first eucharistic narrative: "he [i.e., Jesus] took bread, and giving thanks [or: pronouncing a blessing], broke [it] and said: 'This is my body.' Likewise also the cup, after supper, saying: 'This cup is the covenant in my blood.'"[52] Everything else (and even this much, if Crossan is correct) comes from later strata of tradition.

The import of this is that there is room within Catholic tradition for a theology of the Eucharist that does not see the Last Supper as having initiated a new covenant that superseded the covenant with Israel. There is room for a theology that does not equate the spilling of Jesus' blood with the salvation of the world. There is certainly room for interpretations of Jesus' death that do not invoke the slaughter of the Passover lambs or the Binding of Isaac.

Placed as it is after the reading from Exodus and after a translation of Psalm 116 that portrays the death of God's faithful ones as precious, the reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians furthers a theology in which the shedding of Jesus's blood appears as both initiated and ap-

[49]Ibid., 346.
[50]Ibid., 345.
[51]Ibid., 346.
[52]Ibid., 347 (brackets appear in the original).

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proved of by God. Paul, after all, urges the Christians in Corinth not simply to remember the death of Jesus, as one might remember the tragic loss of a holy man, but indeed to *proclaim* it. A prayer later in the liturgy confirms the connection between blood and salvation: "Lord, make us worthy to celebrate these mysteries. Each time we offer this memorial sacrifice, the work of our redemption is accomplished."[53]

As Wiesel has pointed out, the connection between death and salvation finds only limited resonance within Jewish tradition. Judaism, though it certainly has a history of valorizing its martyrs, has nonetheless for the most part seen the deaths of those martyrs as tragedies to be mourned. Catholicism, on the other hand, has exulted in the crucifixion of Jesus and in the deaths of Christian martyrs. The Holy Thursday liturgy uses texts written by Jewish authors (the Passover story from Exodus, Psalm 116, and Paul's letter to the Christians at Corinth) to present the shedding of blood as a cause for joy. During the course of the Mass, the presider prays, "In union with the whole Church we celebrate that day when Jesus Christ, our Lord, was betrayed for us." This is a significant and, I believe, unnecessary shading of the meanings of the Jewish texts.

V. The Washing of the Feet: John 13:1-15 (And the Ritual of Footwashing)

Unlike the other three canonical gospels, the Gospel of John contains no account of Jesus breaking bread and drinking wine with his friends at the Last Supper. Instead, it offers a different memory. As the portion read at the Mass of the Last Supper recounts:

> So, during supper . . . [Jesus] rose from supper and took off his outer garments. He took a towel and tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and dry them with the towel around his waist . . . So when he had washed their feet and put his garments back on and reclined at table again, he said to them, "Do you realize what I have done for you? . . . I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.[54]

As might be expected, scholars disagree about whether or not this account has any basis in history. The Jesus Seminar, a group dedicated to the search for what it calls "the authentic Jesus," writes regarding

[53]NCCB, *Sacramentary*, 138.
[54]NCCB, *Lectionary*, 296-97. The text is from John 13:2-5, 12, 15.

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John's story of the foot-washing, "The narrative setting is the product of the evangelist's imagination, and the content of Jesus' instruction reflects the evangelist's theology, not the vision of Jesus."[55] On the other hand, Raymond Brown offers tentative support for the opposite conclusion. He notes that there were two different interpretations of foot-washing in the Johannine church, and thus, "the tradition of the foot-washing must have been old." Perhaps, he implies, it was old enough to have originated with Jesus. Furthermore, regarding the likelihood of Jesus having performed such a clearly symbolic gesture, Brown writes, "While such a prophetic action may seem implausible to modern eyes, one could point to much more bizarre actions by Jeremiah and Ezekiel predicting the fall of Jerusalem."[56]

Regardless of whether or not Jesus actually washed the feet of his disciples, the story as told by John has given rise to numerous interpretations. The description of Jesus' gesture has been read as an example of humility, as a symbol of the Eucharist, as a symbol of baptism, as an argument against baptism, as a sacrament in addition to Eucharist and baptism, as a sign of forgiveness and cleansing, and as a sign of the salvation wrought by Jesus's death.[57] The text narrating the scene is complicated and fertile, and it continues to generate new speculation and insight.

If the meaning of the gospel text is unclear, however, the meaning of the ritual that follows is less ambiguous. At the Mass of the Lord's Supper, it is customary for the presider physically to wash the feet of one or more of the faithful. The directions for this ritual are minimal. After those who have been chosen have been led to chairs prepared for them, "the priest (removing his chasuble if necessary) goes to each man. With the help of the ministers, he pours water over each one's feet and dries them."[58] In the United States, not just men but women also can participate in this ritual.[59]

The meaning of the ceremony is spelled out by the antiphons that are suggested by the *Sacramentary*. One verse quotes Jesus as saying, "If there is this love among you, all will know that you are my disciples." Another emphasizes the *mandatum* of Holy Thursday: "I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you, says the Lord." Still another borrows a text from Paul's letter to the Corin-

[55]Robert W. Funk et al., *The Acts of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 419.

[56]Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi)* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 568.

[57]See John Christopher Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 11-17.

[58]NCCB, *Sacramentary*, 136.

[59]http://www.usccb.org/liturgy/q%26a/general/feet.shtml

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thians: "Faith, hope, and love, let these endure among you; and the greatest of these is love."[60] The ritual is clearly interpreted as a symbol of Jesus' devotion for his followers and, therefore, the love that the followers ought to have for one another. Significantly, "love" here is identified by an action. If there is *this* love among you, Jesus says, that is, if you *serve* each other, then people will identify you as followers of Jesus.

Just as significantly, however, John's account of the footwashing emphasizes service only within the Christian community. As John Christopher Thomas notes, "There is nothing in this to suggest that footwashing be extended beyond the limits of the disciples (i.e. the believers)."[61] And yet, perhaps this moment of the Mass of the Lord's Supper would be the perfect time to remind Catholics that their *mandatum* extends also to the poor, to the brokenhearted, to captives and to prisoners, and indeed to all who mourn, as Isaiah proclaimed and as Jesus echoed. Perhaps Holy Thursday would be the perfect time to recall the not-so-distant past when Catholics were faced with the choice of whether to serve or whether to turn away from their Jewish brothers and sisters. Many served. Many, many, turned away.

VI. Conclusion

Earlier, I said that Catholicism cannot use Passover imagery without taking into account how that imagery has changed since the Holocaust. But of course it can. It can dismiss such associations as irrelevant to the true meaning of the holiday, or it can brush them aside as relevant only to Jews. However, as Elie Wiesel has asserted, the Holocaust is not a Jewish problem—it is instead a Christian problem.[62] Christians are faced with the question of how millions of Jews could be slaughtered in the heart of Christian Europe by people who had virtually all been raised as Christians. Many of the murderers continued to think of themselves as good Christians even during the Holocaust, and some went so far as to see what they were doing as their good Christian duty.

Given that fact, it seems that the least that Catholic tradition can do is to examine itself to see how it relates itself to Judaism. A good place

[60]NCCB, *Sacramentary*, 137.

[61]Thomas, 109.

[62]In a filmed interview with Ronald Eyre, Wiesel remarks, "I don't understand the victims and I don't understand the killers. But I must say that the victims are my problem. The killers are not. The killers were Christian . . . . All the killers were Christian . . . . And that's a Christian problem" (see *The Long Search*, part 7, *Judaism: The Chosen People* [New York: Ambrose Video, distributed by Time-Life Films, 1977]).

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to start is with the way it has appropriated and reinterpreted the central Jewish scriptures and festivals. In the Passover Seder, Jews remind themselves that their liberation came at the expense of their cruel masters' suffering. They spill a few drops of wine in memory of those masters. How much more should Catholicism remember not the time of its oppression, but the time when many of its members oppressed Jews to the point of death. A few drops of reflection do not seem too much to ask.

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