

THE ESSENCE AND PURPOSE OF THE “HOLY COMMUNION”

IS IT STILL RELEVANT FOR TODAY’S BELIEVER IN CHRIST?

Gerrie Malan (May 2021)

²⁶As they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take and eat it; this is My body." ²⁷Then He took a cup, and after giving thanks, He gave it to them and said, "Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸For this is My blood that establishes the covenant; it is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹But I tell you, from this moment I will not drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it in a new way in My Father's kingdom with you." (Mat 26:26-29, Holman Christian Standard Bible)

¹⁴When the hour came, He reclined at the table, and the apostles with Him. ¹⁵Then He said to them, "I have fervently desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." ¹⁷Then He took a cup, and after giving thanks, He said, "Take this and share it among yourselves. ¹⁸For I tell you, from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."

¹⁹And He took bread, gave thanks, broke it, gave it to them, and said, "This is My body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me." ²⁰In the same way He also took the cup after supper and said, "This cup is the new covenant established by My blood; it is shed for you. (Luk 22:14-20, HCSB)

²³For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: on the night when He was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread, ²⁴gave thanks, broke it, and said, "This is My body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of Me." ²⁵In the same way He also took the cup, after supper, and said, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." ²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. (1 Co 11:23-26, HCSB)

INTRODUCTORY OBSERVATIONS

Although I have often viewed videos on this subject in the course of several years and also consulted relevant literature, a recent question posed to me has renewed my focus on it. And whereas I regularly accentuate the necessity of understanding Scripture within the full context of the time in which it took place, this study has caused me to realise the importance of correct context with new intensity. For Bible study it is absolutely necessary to understand the implications flowing from the reality that the Bible is composed of 66 books (canonical books) written over a period of 1400+ years and by some 40 people, in three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek), and on three different continents. **While important aspects of culture can remain in place over centuries, large cultural changes and therefore contextual differences are also inevitable.**

Against this understanding I have focussed on the meanings and customs of the ancient nation of Israel leading up to and including the time during which the life of Jesus of Nazareth was recorded in the Bible Gospels and Letters. The Biblical descriptions of the life of Jesus of Nazareth clearly show that He honoured the existing traditions of the time in as far as it reflected the Law of Moses (or rather, the teaching/instruction of Israel's God). Because the traditions and customs of Biblical Israel are interwoven so widely, it also posed a challenge to me to present this topic as complete as possible for the ordinary reader, but without making it unnecessarily long.ⁱ

There are a number of important elements in the specific event to consider:

1. Specific traditions
2. Shared meal and specifically the Passover Meal
3. Bread
4. Wine
5. Covenant

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF SPECIFIC TRADITIONS

After Israel's exodus from Egypt, they received God's covenant through Moses (also known as the Mosaic Covenant) at Sinai. For the first time one reads that God organised a nation in its whole community essence – including the religious, legal, economic, social and moral respects. The Tabernacle that was constructed according to God's command and directives, became the centre of Israel's whole existence from that point forward. Several centuries later king David captured Jerusalem from the Jebusites and it became Israel's capital. Later, his son Solomon built the first Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple replaced the Tabernacle as the centre of the Israelite community. An Israelite's whole existence, his daily life activities, was rooted in worship.ⁱⁱ

THE DINING TABLE AS ALTAR

Jerusalem was attacked by the Babylonian forces in the years 597 and 587/586 BC and large numbers of Israelites (Jews) were taken in exile to Babylon. The Temple was destroyed as well. This exile lasted some 70 years.ⁱⁱⁱ Without the Temple and priesthood in their midst, the Jews developed a system of laws and customs to keep and preserve the commands of God which could no longer be carried out. In this way the synagogue system was extended and **the dining table became a substitute altar in their residences**. Fathers could teach their children about the sacrifices with what was on the table. This would ensure that people would not forget the commandments of God and when they returned to the land they would be able to continue fulfilling the commandments. Jesus and His disciples therefore partook in the Passover meal around the "substitute altar".^{iv}

THE PRESENCE AND STATUS OF THE EVENING MEAL

In the Jewish culture (and for the Greeks and Romans too) the evening meal was any day's main meal. It could even start in the late afternoon and continue into the night.^v This explains why Jesus and His disciples enjoyed the Passover meal in the evening. Today Jews still enjoy their traditional weekly Sabbath meal at home in the evening.

This also explains where the term 'last supper' came from - 'avondmaal' in the Dutch language and 'nagmaal' Afrikaans.

It is also important to realise that even an ordinary group meal entailed much more than simply nourishing the body. In the Jewish cultural tradition having a meal together was an intimate event (and still is today). Around the dining table the group exposed or opened up themselves to each other. Benner, of the Ancient Hebrew Research Center, describes the Passover meal as an

ordered arrangement that can be compared to a symphony in which the many parts bring forth one harmonious sound.^{vi}

This explains Paul's dismay with the disorderliness and divisions that reigned during the Corinthians' meetings beyond any doubt (1 Co 11:17-34). Earlier, chapter 5, he already mentioned specific groups of people among them whom they were not to eat with!!

A good relatively contemporary example occurred in September 1993 when a peace agreement was signed at the American Whitehouse between the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Israel's prime minister Yitzhak Rabin. The photo appeared in the media world-wide. In Israel, however, the question was asked whether they had a meal together. That had much greater importance among the Jews than seeing them shaking hands. See, for example, the meeting between Abraham and Melchizedek in Genesis 14:17-24.



THE PRESENCE AND STATUS OF BREAD IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

Bread is encountered as a primary source of food throughout the Bible. It is also used with wheat as symbols of the earth's fertility. Bethlehem, the town where Jesus was born, means 'house of bread.' The attitude of people toward bread was essentially religious. Out of this attitude of sacredness there grew a custom of always breaking bread and never cutting it. To cut bread with a knife was regarded as wicked, as if it was the same as cutting life itself. Thus the expression "to break bread" came to mean the taking of a meal irrespective of what food was included in the meal.^{vii}

⁴²And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayers. (...) ⁴⁶And every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple complex, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, ... (Acts 2:42, 46, HCSB).

In the words of Jesus to His disciples in breaking the bread during that last Passover meal, bread became the symbol of God's greatest gift to humanity – eternal life!

THE PRESENCE AND STATUS OF WINE IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

Wine also features prominently throughout the Bible. Noah was the first recorded vine grower. Ancient Israel also became one of the earliest of all wine-producing countries, more than 2000 years before the grape vine reached Europe. It was used for religious, medical and social purposes, and even as a dyeing agent. Wine was praised as a Godly gift to be enjoyed, but it could also be a dangerous intoxicant that held corrupting danger. People drank considerable amounts of wine because it was safer than the available water. The Hebrew *Talmud* describes sixty types of wine, some of which were diluted with water, while flavours were added to others to improve taste and act as preservatives.^{viii}

It is recorded in 1 Chronicles 27:27 that king David had one caretaker over his vineyard and one over his wine cellars. In the New Testament wine features prominently as well, for example, when Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana, and, and the Good Samaritan who used wine to clean the wounds of the hurt traveller on the road to Jericho (Jn 2:11 & Luk 10:34). Wine is

regarded as a symbol of happiness in the Jewish tradition and that is why it is blessed at important Jewish ceremonies such as the Sabbath, weddings or circumcision.^{ix}

The *Mishna* is an important written collection of Jewish oral traditions. It describes at least four cups of wine on the table of the Jewish Passover seder. No Scriptural source is mentioned in this regard, but an emeritus professor of the Jewish Theological Seminary concludes that it is largely a home-based activity sanctioned by the early Rabbis in place of the family's Passover sacrifice at the Temple after its destruction by the Babylonian forces in 587/586 BC.^x

There are different explanations for the four cups of wine, but an important one refers to them as symbolic of God's four promises to a sceptical Moses regarding Israel's deliverance from Egypt (Ex 6:6-8, KJV):^{xi}

- i. *I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, ...*
- ii. *I will rid you out of their bondage, ...*
- iii. *I will redeem you with a stretched out arm ...*
- iv. *I will bring you in unto the land, concerning the which I did swear to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you for an heritage: I am the LORD.*

That third cup is known as the cup of redemption. I personally believe that this explanation provides the original purpose of the early Rabbis, as it is in agreement with the events leading to the institution of the Passover by God. His instruction to Moses and Aaron was that the day should be unto them for a memorial and should be kept as a feast to honour the Lord. It was to remain so throughout their generations (Ex 12:14).

THE PRESENCE AND STATUS OF THE BLOOD COVENANT IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

Various covenant stories are described throughout the Bible. The book of **Hebrews** deals with covenant to a large extent. Would the *The Covenant Book Of God* not have been a more descriptive name for the Bible?

The concept of covenant is normally interpreted as an agreement between two or more parties. However, this falls far short. "Covenant" in the Hebrew context is a metaphor for a relationship. Consider modern terms as well – the marriage covenant demands relationship. A marriage certificate on its own is no guarantee of a successful marriage.

The **Blood Covenant** was the strongest relationship agreement a person could enter into. It entailed much more than a promise or other form of agreement:

- Everything I own, I give you.
- All that I am becomes yours.
- In other words, I am prepared to give my life for you!

In making covenant several steps are followed, of which the last one is the sharing of a covenant meal. This meal always includes bread (symbolising what you have) and wine (symbolising what you are). Jesus' accentuation of these two elements was therefore firmly rooted in the Jewish cultural tradition of His time.

Covenantal language is one of several metaphors used in the Biblical and Jewish tradition to describe relationships. It is used in various ways to describe the relationships between God and His creation, and especially the relationship between God and Israel. Failure to recognise the metaphorical nature of this language sadly substituted confused and confusing doctrines for poetic literature through the centuries.^{xii}

Metaphor – figurative expression rooted in a comparison or similarity. The image is therefore used instead of the actual presentation.

THE REMEMBRANCE INSTITUTION OF JESUS

Jesus instructed them to apply the breaking of bread and the cup of wine in remembrance of Him (Luke 22:19). The wine symbolised the blood of the new covenant. Jesus therefore applied the meaning of the traditional meal which concluded the making of a covenant to their meal. I believe the cup He proclaimed the New Covenant with was the third one, the Cup of Redemption.

Paul repeated it in 1 Corinthians 11:24 and accentuated in verse 25 that it was to be done as often as you ate this bread and drank the cup. Acts 2:46 shows that they continued daily in one accord to visit the Temple and also broke bread from house to house – probably the evening meal – while all the time praising God. Paul accentuated that they were not to stop doing so.

Please note – it was not to be a ritual such as that which is found generally in the church environment, albeit in different ways, but a full meal. My reference to ritual is not made with any derogatory intent, but flows forth from decades of personal experiences. . When my namesake grandfather lay dying of stomach cancer in 1955, he asked that the congregation’s minister come and serve him the holy communion in hospital. The minister replied that communion is served in church and only in church once every quarter (three months). I also recall several of the group of young people that I was part of, say at the time of our formal procedural acceptance and presentation as full members of the congregation, that we were receiving our wine license that day. I have heard the same statement at various times after that.

One should see Paul’s statement that by eating the bread and drinking from the cup they will be proclaiming the Lord’s death “until He comes,” against the background that he and other apostles proclaimed Christ’s return as imminent. Their focus, therefore, was fully directed at the people of their generation and not on a future one. For them the “end-times prophecy” and “return” of Jesus did not refer to a distant future event as modern popular end-times teachings would have it, but to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Roman forces in the year of 70 AD.^{xiii} In this regard, see Matthew 16:28 and John 16:19, for example:

I assure you: There are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom." (Mat 16:28, HCSB)

Jesus ... said to them (His disciples), "Are you asking one another about what I said, 'A little while and you will not see Me; again a little while and you will see Me'? (Jn 16:19, HCSB)

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

My reference to an implied fulfilled return of Christ and the two examples from Scripture in support might confuse some readers. I do not wish to make this discussion too drawn out by dealing

with that topic here. I rather recommend downloading and reading several articles on end-times topics, as well as the free downloadable book, *The End-times Prophecy Of Jesus*, from our website: www.hoseaconnection.org.

The expressions *Last Supper*, *Holy Communion* or *Eucharist* are insufficient in proclaiming the fulness of what took place during that last Passover meal of Jesus with His intimate group of disciples. I personally started using the term ‘covenant meal’ years ago. In view of my discussion in this article, I feel it is a much more accurate description of the event and institution of Jesus.

This now brings us to the question that I was asked and which led to this study-article: If Jesus indeed returned as I believe and in view of Paul’s description (1 Co 11:23-26), should we still commemorate or practise the “holy communion?”

I personally believe from the Scripture, that believers today should commemorate the Living Christ. Yes, it is inevitable that the crucified Covenant Lamb will be mentioned as historical reality in the New Covenant process, but the risen Lord in His kingly reign and who is seated on His throne at the right hand of God the Father in the heavenly dimension (Heb 12:2) is the One to whom I should give honour and worship. I cannot see any reason why the covenant meal should not continue in spirit and truth (Jn 4:23) – not as a quarterly or monthly or even weekly ritual, but as often as people assemble in the name of Jesus. When we led a house assembly from 2001 to 2004, each meeting (Thursday evening and Sunday morning) commenced with the covenant meal. My wife Martie and I did so on our own as a believing married couple and we certainly intend to continue whenever it is felt in our heart – and not as a ritual.

¹¹Now the Messiah has appeared, high priest of the good things that have come. In the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands (that is, not of this creation), ¹²He entered the holy of holies once for all, not by the blood of goats and calves, but by His own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.
(Heb 9:11-12, HCSB)

ⁱ By “ordinary reader” I refer to those who do not read from and with a strict academical approach.

ⁱⁱ See my article *The Tabernacles Of Moses And David* for more detail – www.hoseaconnection.org.

ⁱⁱⁱ Malan, G & M. 2014. *Daniel Without Make-up And Long Toes: The Prophecies Of Daniel Revisited*. The Hoseaconnection. www.hoseaconnection.org.

^{iv} Benner, J. 2017. *What Is The Origin Of Baptism?* Ancient Hebrew Research Center. Email received 14 December.

^v Strong number G1173. Strong’s Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries. Meyers, R. e-Sword version 12.0.1. www.e-sword.net.

^{vi} Benner, J. 2007. *The Living Words, Volume 1*. College Station, TX: Virtualbookworm.com Publishing. P.90.

^{vii} Bible History Online. *Cutting Bread*. https://www.bible-history.com/links.php?cat=39&sub=732&cat_name=Manners+subcat_name=Bread.

^{viii} Montefiore, A. 2012. Wine Talk: Ancient Wine. *The Jerusalem Post*. 1 February. <https://www.jpost.com/arts-and-culture/food-and-wine/wine-talk-ancient-wine>.

^{ix} Querub, E. 2006. The role of wine in Jewish culture. *Jewish World*. Published 20 November. <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3330058,00.html>.

^x Schorsch, I. 1997. *4 Cups Of Wine*. Jewish Theological Seminary. <https://www.jtsa.edu/4-cups-of-wine>.

^{xi} Silberberg, N. *Why four cups of wine by the seder?* Chabad.org.

https://www.chabad.org/holidays/passover/pesach_cdo/aid/658549/jewish/Why-four-cups-of-wine.htm.

^{xii} Solomon, N. September 2001. *Covenant*. Oxford.

https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/center/conferences/solomon.htm.

^{xiii} Malan, G & M. 2nd edition. 2014. *The End-times Prophecy Of Jesus (Revisiting The Olivet Discourse)*. The Hoseaconnection. www.hoseaconnection.org.