

The Passover story's ambivalence (Exodus 12:1-14)

It's hard to take it strictly on its own terms.

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The Maundy Thursday lectionary joins three related but distinct stories. There is John's version of Jesus' last meal with his disciples, which does not mention the blessing of bread and wine that would become known as the Eucharist. There is Paul's recounting of the Lord's Supper tradition that focuses on that blessing and thanksgiving. And there is a segment of the story of the Passover. In 20 years of preaching, I don't think I've ever given this Exodus reading its due. I'm not sure I've heard any other preachers do so either. Perhaps this neglect has nudged some Christians toward attempting Christian "seders" on Maundy Thursday (a practice my Jewish friends have not been enthusiastic about).

It's easy—and traditional—to diminish the Passover story to a typology, a foreshadowing of a Christian fulfillment. The lamb is a type of Jesus, whose blood protects the faithful; or the meal is a type of the Lord's Supper; or the escape from Egypt itself is a type of God's rescue of humanity from sin and hell through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (I haven't asked them, but I suspect my Jewish friends are less than keen on these interpretive moves, too.)

At the same time, it's also hard to take the story strictly on its own terms. The plague of the firstborn is, reasonably, shocking to our sensibilities. Nevertheless, it is from within the larger ethic expressed in both Testaments that this shock arises. The whole history of war and revolution confirms that humanity is at least as willing as God to exact and to pay a high price for whatever we consider freedom. That life may only rightly be taken for a cause, and that collective punishment is, at least gradually, excluded from ethical consideration, is discernible even before Exodus concludes.

I wonder how this story will come to sound in a world that is moving away from the concepts of human rights and international humanitarian law that have at least nominally governed the world for most of the last century. "On all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments," God says of the imminent slaughter of the firstborn. A skeptic might read this as a fantasy of comeuppance in a world ruled, as ours increasingly is, by force and coercion rather than by legal procedures.

The problem with a Christological reading of this story is that it places the church in the place of the Hebrews while obscuring the ways we might identify instead with Pharaoh, his armies, and his gods. As a story of hope and liberation, the Passover is inherently ambivalent. As a warning, it is crystal clear.