

# Feast of Freedom

- a background to the Christian foundations of breaking bread

## HEBREW ROOTS

### Background to the Christian meal

What happened in the upper room on the evening before Jesus' crucifixion, and the practice of breaking bread from house to house, characteristic of the Jerusalem church was something quite new. However, it was built out of features that were part of the very fabric of Jewish culture. While some influences may have had greater significance than others we will only begin to understand 'breaking bread' if we recognize some of the essential strands that lie behind it. There are in fact four primary Hebrew roots that lie behind a Christian understanding of breaking bread; each is built into a particular cycle of life (day, week, year, destiny) and each has a distinctive emphasis and theme:

Name	Celebrated	Theme
Family meal	Daily	Fellowship
Sabbath meal	Weekly	Covenant
Passover meal	Annually	Remembrance
Messianic meal	Ultimately	Hope

### Family meal

In Middle Eastern society the main meal of the day was 'supper'; a simple family meal consisting of bread, wine and probably a vegetable stew. It would begin by the head of the house taking bread and breaking it, giving thanks to God for the food, (cf Lk 9:16; 24:30). Thus 'breaking bread' was the common way of referring to having a meal with others. So it was the ordinary daily family meal that gave the context in which the Christian practice of 'breaking bread' was usually to take place. It brought the new covenant significance of the Passover meal into the common daily family meal. This is clearly seen by the practice of the Jerusalem Christians who, 'day by day ... broke bread in their homes and partook of food with glad and generous hearts' (Acts 2:46). This has profound implications for both the practice of breaking bread and the significance of Christian hospitality.

#### ▪ Table of Family

##### ➤ A place to belong:

- 'Breaking bread' refers to a family meal
- Embraced by the parenthood of God
- 'Open circle' of friendship, 'closed circle' of commitment
- "Let the children come..." (Mk 10:14)
- "Unless you turn and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt 18:3)



## Sabbath meal

Another strand in the tapestry of 'breaking bread' is the Sabbath meal, held once a week, in every Jewish home on Friday evening. This is a *Qiddush* (meaning 'consecrating', 'sanctifying', 'hallowing'), fulfilling the commandment to 'remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy' (Ex 20:8). The family gathers around the table. The woman of the house lights the Sabbath candles with a prayer of thanksgiving. On the table is a white tablecloth. In front of the person at the head of the table are two specially baked loaves of bread representing the double portion of manna that had to be gathered before the Sabbath in the wilderness began (Ex 16:25-30). Beside them is a jug of wine and an empty glass. They read from Genesis the account of the sixth and seventh days of creation. They fill the wine glass and holds it up with a prayer of thanksgiving to God for creation and the gift of the Sabbath. Each member of the family then drinks from the cup as it passes around the table. Hands are then washed; the bread is blessed, broken and shared out. The Sabbath meal is then eaten. It closes with Psalm 126 being read.

Though the mention of the first cup of wine in Luke's account of the 'last supper' (Lk 22:17-18) must certainly be understood within the Passover context, it also has the touch of the opening moments of the Sabbath meal. This is emphasized by the way in which the 'Didache' also places the cup before the bread in its instructions about 'breaking bread'. The weekly Sabbath meal stands midway between the daily family meal and the annual Passover meal. There can be little doubt that elements from it influenced early Christian practice in some way, especially in the corporate celebration, probably on 'the first day of the week' and its celebration of the resurrection, the only source of the true *Shabbat Shalom*.

### ▪ Table of Covenant

- Promise of allegiance:
  - Act of binding covenant (Heb *berith*)
  - An oath of allegiance and an unbreakable promise
  - Between God and each other - both horizontal and vertical
  - 'If I break bread with you, I tell you that I am prepared to die for you'
  - Jesus says, "This is the new covenant in my blood" (Lk 22:20)
  - New covenant of the Spirit - written on the heart, bursting old wineskins

## Passover meal

Once a year in the spring the Jewish community celebrate the Passover meal in joyful remembrance of their freedom from slavery in Egypt and the beginning of their journey towards the promised land. As we shall see below it is clearly the setting for the 'Last Supper' and was to be a primary influence upon the development of a Christian understanding of 'Breaking bread'. Nevertheless ... there has been much debate about the dating of the events surrounding the Easter story, leading many to question whether the 'Last Supper' was in fact a Passover meal. While these difficulties are not easy to resolve they do not need to detain us here. Whatever problems they present, the answer is clear, the events of the 'Last Supper' fit perfectly into the context of the Passover meal, as we shall discover. Suffice it to say that the whole theme of release from slavery, redemption by sacrifice, covenant making in blood etc. are major themes of both the Exodus and the upper room to which the Passover is also central.



## ▪ **Table of Memory**

- Token of remembrance:
  - An item of value and memory
  - “Do this in remembrance of me” (Lk 22:19)
  - We remember / focus on Jesus - the example of his life as well as his death
  - Memory is the consciousness of the past
  - Hope is the memory of the future
  - We remember so as not to forget / and to be changed

## **Messianic meal**

A recurring theme in the Hebrew hope is the anticipation of a banquet that will be the expression of joy at the coming of God’s messianic Kingdom (Isa 25:6). It was an expectation Jesus happily affirmed and the early Christians embraced (cf Mat 8:11; Lk 14:15-24; 22:30; Rev 3:20; 19:9). It also seems certain that the ‘common meals’ shared by the members of the Qumran community were celebrated as an anticipation of the coming Messianic feast. Jesus himself made it clear that the ‘Last Supper’ was a foretaste of the full messianic glory and banquet that lay in the future, participation in which would only be possible through his death and resurrection (Mat 26:27-29). This ‘eschatological’ element is an important aspect of the Christian experience of ‘breaking bread’.

## ▪ **Table of Expectation**

- Appetite of anticipation:
  - “... until he comes” (1Cor 11:26)
  - “... a living hope” (1Pt 1:3)
  - Hope is like candlelight at the peacemeal
  - “Watch, for you do not know the hour...” (Mt 24:42)
  - First Passover was eaten dressed and ready to travel (Ex 11:11)
  - Gideon’s army drank with watchfulness (Jg 7:5 cf Mk 13:33)
  - Hope is ... longing, confidence and patience

## ▪ **Table of Destiny**

- Hors d’oeuvres of messianic banquet:
  - Bring on the main course!
  - The best is yet to come
  - Hebrew idea of the eschatological banquet (Isa 25:6; Rev 19:9)
  - ‘Oh the joy of eating bread in the kingdom of heaven’ (Lk 14:15)
  - ‘Until I eat / drink it new in the kingdom of my Father’ (Lk 22:16,18)
  - ‘Give us today the bread of tomorrow’ (Mt 6:11; Lk 11:3)
  - cf Gk *epiousion* - ‘belonging to tomorrow’

## **JESUS EXAMPLE**

### **Jesus’ table fellowship**

Notice how often we see Jesus at the meal table; sometimes intimately with the disciples (eg Mt 26:17-25), feeding others (eg Jn 6:1-15) or feeding at the homes of others as an invited guest (Lk 7:36-50), even inviting himself as a guest (Lk 19:1-10):



- Jesus' teaching often took place during a shared meal (cf Mk 14:3-9; Lk 7:36-50; 10:38-42; 11:37-52; 14:1-24; 22:14-38)
- Jesus frequently used the imagery of meal in his teaching (cf Mk 7:1-23; 12:39; 14:22-25; Mt 8:11; 22:1-14; 23:23-26; 25:1-13; Lk 12:35-38; 14:7-24; 17:7-10; 22:27,30)
- Jesus used the idea of the communal meal as a picture of the future (eg Mt 8:11; Mk 14:25; Lk 22:30)

Added to this, it is now recognized that Jesus' table fellowship - 'eating with tax collectors and sinners' – was one of the most important central features of his public activity.<sup>1</sup> Why was this the case? <sup>2</sup> Along with 'free healing' it shattered the social boundaries and affirmed access to God without intermediaries with a sharing of material and spiritual resources. This was revolutionary in a world of boundaries and intermediaries. For Jesus table fellowship embodied a social vision for Israel.

Early Christian meals are best explained as a continuation of the regular practice of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> It has been noted that it is the practice that marked Jesus out from his contemporaries and earlier Hebrew prophets Jesus 'took his stand among the pariahs of his world, those despised by the respectable. Sinners were his table companions and the ostracized tax collectors and prostitutes his friends.'<sup>4</sup> It was the basis for serious attack against Jesus (Mt 11:19; Mk 2:15; Lk 7:34; 15:1-2; 19:7).

To sit at table with someone was an expression of intimacy and fellowship, to invite someone to a meal was to honour them and express trust and acceptance. To refuse to share a meal stated disapproval and rejection. In Jesus' day table fellowship for the Pharisees was a symbol of holiness and purity, both how you yourself ate and whom you ate with. It was about separation.

So for Jesus the meal was a revolutionary act; shattering the exclusive ideas of holiness and using it to express the extravagance of God's grace and mercy, both to all and especially the least expected. The meal was at the heart of his proclamation of the good news of the kingdom and at the leading edge of his evangelism. This was to have a major impact on the early Christian understanding of breaking bread.

#### ▪ **Table of Forgiveness**

##### ➤ Place of reconciliation:

- Atonement (at-one-ment);
- "This is my blood ... for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28);
- Hospitality embraces your enemy;
- 'If your enemy is hungry, feed them' (Rm 12:20);
- Making enemies friends ... you only eat with friends;
- Zacchaeus: 'guest of a sinner ... today salvation has come to this house (Lk 19:1-10);
- Jesus and Peter at dawn in Galilee (Jn 21:15-19);
- The kiss of peace (1Cor 16:20; 2Cor 13:12 et al);
- Pure and innocent - we become virgins all over again (cf 2Cor 11:2).

<sup>1</sup> Joachim Jeremias *'New Testament Theology'* SCM 1971 p114-116

<sup>2</sup> See Marcus Borg *'Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the teaching of Jesus'* Trinity Press 1984 p5-6, 39, 93-134 much of the material in this section is based on Borg's observations

<sup>3</sup> Norman Perrin *'Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus'* Harper and Row 1967 p104-107

<sup>4</sup> Geza Vermes *'Jesus the Jew'* Collins 1973 p224



## Last supper

Jesus' table-fellowship comes to a climax in an upper room in the evening of the night of betrayal, arrest and crucifixion. This meal that Jesus had with his closest disciples was obviously very important to him, we hear him saying, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Lk 22:15). It was a brief moment of intimacy and focused sharing and communication before the storm broke.

While there are many influences that will shape the early Christian understanding and experience of breaking bread, this meal (Mt 26:17-30; Mk 14:12-26; Lk 22:7-30; Jn 13:1-17:25) is to have a central impact.

The synoptic gospels make it clear that the last supper was a Passover meal.<sup>5</sup> This ancient meal has elements that even pre-date the events of the Exodus that is the focus of its celebration. The Passover liturgy has become more developed over the millennia, it had a much simpler structure in Jesus' day than the more elaborate pattern celebrated in the global Jewish community today (see Appendix: Passover Meal for a detailed explanation of the contemporary meal).

We are far from certain exactly how the Passover in Jesus' day was celebrated, each family would also have their own particular interpretation; added to this Jesus was bringing a radical new understanding related to himself and the kingdom of God. The simplest pattern of the Passover in Jesus' day was almost certainly a central meal prefaced and concluded by two separate glasses of wine (four in total) each with a theme; then bread (*matzah*), green herbs (*karpas*), bitter herbs (*maror*) and sweet paste (*haroset*). It is structured in four sections:

- **Beginnings**
  - Blessing over first cup of wine
  - Drink first cup - 'To Life' *Qiddush*
  - Eating *karpas*
- **Passover story**
  - Exodus story told
  - Blessing over second cup of wine
  - Drink second cup - 'To Freedom' *Haggadah*
  - Sharing the *maror* and *haroset*
- **Passover meal**
  - Bread is blessed and broken
  - Meal is served and eaten
  - Blessing over third cup of wine
  - Drink third cup - 'To Peace' Blessing
- **Conclusions**
  - Singing Psalms (114-118)
  - Blessing over fourth cup of wine
  - Drink fourth cup - 'To Jerusalem'

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<sup>5</sup> Some people have questioned whether the 'Last supper' was in fact a Passover meal due to both the dating of the event and what took place during it, but this certainly is a minority view

We shall reflect on the last supper as a Passover meal of Jesus' day in the light of phrases used about it in the Gospels and 1 Corinthians, thinking about the actions, as they correspond to the Palestinian Passover meal rather than words Jesus says:

- *'The he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes" (Lk 22:17-18)*
  - This refers to the first cup, the *Qidush* (Sanctification) that is blessed and drunk by everyone at the start of the meal. It has the theme (toast) "To life!"
- *'Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them saying, "This is my body, ..." (Lk 22:19)*
  - This is the blessing, breaking and sharing of the *matza* before everyone eats the main meal together.
- *'And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you ..." (Lk 22:20 cf 1Cor 11:25)*
  - This refers to the third cup, 'the cup of blessing'; it is called 'blessing' because it comes after a long and beautiful blessing that is said to conclude the meal, the theme of both the blessing is 'peace'
  - Paul is making it clear that it is the third cup that is being referred to when he says, "Is not the cup that we drink the cup of blessing"

Other elements:

- *"It is one of the twelve who is dipping bread into the bowl with me"*
  - This may be during the main meal, but it could equally refer to the eating of the *maror* earlier in the celebration. John's reference to Jesus handing it to Judas as a sign of favour would suggest *maror* given by the host to honour a guest
- *'And during supper ... (Jesus) got up from the table ... poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples feet ...' (Jn 13:2-5)*
  - In the Passover today there are two points at which hand washing takes place; first after the *Qidush* cup, the second just prior to eating the main meal – this may have happened at the second point, or it may simply be an innovation of Jesus
- *'And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives' (Mt 26:30)*
  - The last words of liturgy that Jesus would have sung that night would have been those of Psalm 118 – the conclusion of the 'Great *Hallel*'
- *'My father, if it is possible let this cup pass from me...'* (Mt 26:39)
  - According to the gospel accounts Jesus did not drink the fourth cup in the upper room that Passover night, but he was to drink the 'cup of obedience' to God's will in the hours that lay ahead.

So Jesus seems to follow a very simple form of the first century CE Palestinian Passover meal, but radically adapting and changing it to suit his purpose. It is hard to imagine the shock the disciples must have felt as the time-honoured liturgy they had known from



childhood was given a whole new form and direction which they would not begin to really comprehend until after the day of Pentecost.

#### □ **Table of Sacrifice**

- Place of life and death:
  - Sacrifice
  - Point of death and resurrection
  - “... at the price of my blood” (Lk 22:20)
  - Violence (blood)
  - Brokenness (bread)
  - Non-violence

## **EARLY CHURCH**

### **Resurrection meals**

As our focus passes from the events of the ‘Last Supper’ our attention is drawn to two beautiful incidents woven into the story of the resurrection appearances of Jesus, which must have ‘eucharistic’ significance:

- **Luke 24:13-35** The experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus who in offering hospitality to Jesus, recognized him as ‘he took the bread and blessed, and broke it and gave it to them’ (v 30). Their testimony was, ‘he was known to us in the breaking of bread’ (v 35)
- **John 21:1-4** At dawn on the shore of Galilee attention is on a stranger by a charcoal fire, with his invitation, ‘Come and have breakfast’ (v 12). It continues, ‘They knew it was the Lord ... Jesus came and took bread and gave it to them’ (v 13)

There is little doubt that the way these stories are told they are highlighting the profound truth that ‘breaking bread’ is a dynamic experience which cannot be separated from an encounter with the resurrection in a way that flows out of the natural experience of living life.

#### ▪ **Table of Encounter**

- Impact of Resurrection:
  - ‘Known to them in the breaking of bread’ (Lk 24:35)
  - ‘They knew it was the Lord’ (Jn 21:12)
  - Encountering the resurrection / empowered by the Spirit
  - Something happens!

### **Pentecost people**

Of course it is the events of the earliest Christian community in Jerusalem immediately after Pentecost that begin to suggest the form in which ‘breaking bread’ should develop:

‘And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers ... And day by day attending the Temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and finding favour with all the people’ (Acts 2:42-47).



Here the spontaneity, excitement, and naturalness of their whole life are evident on every hand. The daily family meal was an act of worship; it had 'breaking bread' at its heart, and was open to all who had the life of God through the resurrection of Jesus in common.

#### ▪ **Table of Community**

- Society of friends:
  - "Best friends forever!"
  - Fellowship and communion;
  - *Koinonia* - shared life with all things in common;
  - We are one body - "the Body of Christ";
  - "One another..." (many references);
  - "When you come together each one brings..."(1Cor 14:26);
  - The place where the new wine of the kingdom is flowing;
  - Both exclusive and inclusive.

#### **Agape: the love-feast**

The very name 'breaking bread' implies a full meal; in fact it has no complete and natural meaning outside of that context. This is what happened in the Jerusalem church, as we noted above and was clearly the practice of all the other churches in the New Testament era:

- The Christians in Corinth clearly 'broke bread' within the context of a communal meal (1Cor 11:17-22); however they needed some correction about their behaviour
- In Troas, on 'the first day of the week', the Christians gathered to 'break bread' and have a meal together (Acts 20:7,11); the phrase 'had broken bread and ate' here emphasizes the act of worship, within the context of the meal
- Jude (v 12) has to bring a word of correction about how the 'love feast' (*agape*) was practiced
- Peter (2 Pet 2:13) has to warn against 'reveling' in the love feasts

All this makes it clear that the 'Agape' with 'breaking bread' at its centre was the normal practice of the early church.

#### ▪ **Table of Devotion**

- A lovers tryst:
  - Desire, communion and union
  - Expressing our love towards God
  - Receiving God's love towards us
  - Sharing our love towards one another
  - "In your presence there is fullness of joy" (Ps 16:11)
  - Woman with the alabaster jar of ointment (Mk 14:3)
  - "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you" (Lk 22:15)
  - 'Abide in the vine' (Jn 15)

#### **Feeding the hungry**

The 'Agape' meal as an act of worship included making sure that all the members of the community, many of whom were very poor, had enough to eat.





It is a failure to do this that lies behind Paul's condemnation of the Corinthian church (1Cor 11:17-22, 27-34). In a meal where everyone would each bring food to share together, whether rich or poor, to eat together in fellowship and friendship; the rich were over eating their own food and the poor were left hungry, this is a corruption of the 'Lord's supper' (v20-21). This is why 'many of you are weak and ill and some have died' (v30). This is why Paul has told them that they must 'examine themselves' (v28), 'discerning the body' (v29).

This is a meal to celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus and to meet the needs of others; it is not a meal for the gratification of personal desires. It is a meal to do with justice.

#### ▪ **Table of Nourishment**

##### ➤ Feast of faith:

- "Give us to day our daily bread" (bread that we need)
- A meal for hungry people; eating with appetite
- Feeding on the 'Tree of Life' (cf Gen 3:22, Rev 2:7)
- 'Eating and drinking your way into the kingdom of God'
- Spiritual / physical food
- "He restores my soul" (Ps 23:3)
- A pilgrims hospice
- 'Geritdoonya' – 'Get it down you!' (Newcastle Brown Ale)
- Elijah - fed by ravens / angels; 40 days / nights (1Kg 17:6; 19:5-8)

#### **Eating as worship and witness**

Moving beyond the pages of the New Testament we discover important evidence that the 'Agape' continued to be the normal pattern for the practice of 'breaking bread', with some beautiful insights into early Christian worship:

- **Pliny** was a Roman governor between the years 98-117 CE, sent by the emperor Trajan to reorganize state affairs in Bithynia, a province in Asia Minor. In his lengthy correspondence with the emperor he makes unique reference to Christian worship:

'They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light when they sang.. a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath (not to sin) .. after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food, but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.'

- **Tertullian**, speaking in the year 210 CE, refers to the 'agape' of his day as, 'Our dinner shows its idea in its name; it is called by the Greek name for love...' He then goes on to describe its beauty and to demonstrate that everything was done in the context of worship
- **Clement of Alexandria** (150-213 CE) shows how in Egypt the practice of the 'Agape' was far from formalized. There were in fact two types of 'agape' side-by-side, one a public meal in the church, the other a household meal. The ordinary meal in the Christian home was in the real sense an agape; there was worship to begin with, the father was the priest, he would bless the bread and wine. Here was deep devotion in the most simple and natural of circumstance. The husband, wife, child, household slave, and invited guest gathered around the domestic table to enjoy with thanksgiving



the good gifts of God. Lifting up their hearts in devotion to God, and extending them in love to one another in brotherly love. Here 'eucharist' was no ritual term but a living experience of common life, thanksgiving and gratitude for the good gifts received

### **'Agape' distorted**

As time unfolded changes took place to the simple form of the 'agape'. The fact that it was an experience open to abuse (so is everything), reflected even in the pages of the New Testament, led to increasing restrictions. The central act of sharing bread and wine' (increasingly referred to as the 'eucharist'), became highlighted at the expense of it being part of a whole meal, where it had originally been placed and in which it found its complete meaning.

The first step was to deliberately separate the act of 'breaking bread' (eucharist) from the meal (*agape*). Thus for some time they continued separately and they became less and less associated with each other. By the end of the third century the *agape* was little more than a 'charity meal'.

- In the 'Didascalia' it is referred to as a 'meal for old women'
- John Chrysostom (354-407) refers to a meal the rich provided for the poor
- Augustine (354-430) refers to it as a charity supper

So the 'agape' was debated, fasting rather than feasting was encouraged; in 692 CE the Council of Trullan forbade the holding of an Agape altogether

We see that abuse, fear and bureaucracy destroyed the original God-given form and context for the Peacemeal. The original pattern of the full family and community meal remain to be fully discovered, explored and experimented with.

### **Questions**

1. What should the influence of the Jewish Passover meal have on a Christian understanding of breaking bread?
2. How ought Jesus' eating with tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners influence our understanding of the Eucharist?
3. What do you think was the significance of the church separating the bread and wine from the complete meal in the development of breaking bread?

### **Reading and Resources**

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