

Derivation of Christianity from Judaism

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Whenever I am asked to give teachings at Catholic charismatic Renewal prayer groups, the first thing that I say is that our Lord Jesus Christ did not just pop out of nowhere: he came from within an ancient culture, the Israelite, or Jewish, or Hebrew culture, which was already about 1,650 years old when he was born!

Thus, I am always astounded when I hear Christians speak of the so-called "first Pentecost", as recorded in Acts 2:1-41. These people seem to forget that the Jewish Feast of Shavuot (Pentecost), was already at least 1,250 years old at the time!

Also, when people speak of the Blessed Virgin Mary as if she were an exemplary Catholic Christian, it does not make sense: as far as we know (and there is no Scriptural support either way), Mary was never baptized (she did not need to be, as she was free from original sin); she never went to Confession (Reconciliation) (she did not have to, as she was preserved from sin); she never went to Mass/Eucharist/Communion, unless she participated in "the breaking of the bread" (Acts 2:46), probably a primitive form of the Eucharist; and the list goes on. In fact, Mary, as a good orthodox Jewish wife and mother, would have done exactly what every good Orthodox Jewish woman does every Friday evening to this day: prepare the Sabbath meal and light the two Sabbath candles, after reciting the required blessing and carrying out the time-honored gestures, as well as prepare and initiate all the Jewish feasts.

Blind nationalism can be a terrible curse. When I was about nine or ten years old in Yugoslavia, my mother and our Hungarian maid had a discussion about Jesus. It went something like this:

Mother: "Did you know that Jesus was a Jew?"

Maid: "No, I thought he was Hungarian!"

Mother: "Certainly not, he was Jewish!"

Maid: "Ooh! I must ask my Parish Priest."

My mother later said to me: "I wonder what he told Ilonka?"

I, as a Hebrew Catholic, have no objection to every nation portraying Jesus and Mary as one of theirs, so long as everyone remembers that the Lord Jesus, his Mother Mary, St. Joseph, all the Apostles and the majority of the early church were Jewish to the core. I am therefore not shocked – nay, gratified – to see so many identifying with the Virgin Mother, especially at the great Basilica of the Annunciation, where each nation has a mosaic or painting of the Virgin Mary in its own image and likeness. Thus, the African Madonnas are black, the American Indian ones are Maya, Aztec, like Our Lady of Guadalupe, etc.

How is it, one may legitimately ask, that while the early Church was 99.9% Jewish, it is now 99.9% Gentile? What happened in between? Some years ago, I was asked to write an article about this by Praise magazine, jointly published by the Anglican and Catholic Charismatic Renewals. To sum up, I said that as the Apostles and their successors went out to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, two things happened: not only did the pagan Gentiles pour into the Church, numerically "diluting" the Jewish membership, but more importantly, the philosophies and world-views of these vast multitudes from virtually every nation on earth inevitably changed the peculiarly Jewish theological and practical approaches to the Church's teaching and praxis. This happened to such an extent that nowadays it needs a lot of research and discernment if one is to peel away the "Gentile" accretions over nearly 2,000 years of the Church's history in order to discover the underlying, basic Jewishness of Christian practices, especially the heart and centre of Catholic praxis, namely the Eucharist.

I believe that this will be a good place to start comparing and contrasting the Passover meal and the Eucharist, which arose out of it, and the venues where each of them is celebrated.

The Passover

In a nutshell, this commemorates the meal taken by the Children of Israel just before their Exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses 3,250 years ago (Exodus 12:1-27).

This Passover meal, also called the Feast of Unleavened Bread, is celebrated essentially as a memorial to what Almighty God has done for the children of Israel: liberating them from slavery in Egypt so that following the meal, they left Egypt and proceeded on their way to the Promised Land (unbeknownst to them, they would not enter it for another 40 years). In fact, out of all the multitudes who left Egypt, only Joshua, son of Nun, was allowed to enter the Land with the descendants of the original Israelites who left Egypt. Not even Moses was allowed to enter, due to disobedience.

During the Seder meal, the first night of Passover, unleavened bread is consumed with bitter herbs (signifying slavery), with sweet things (grated apples, nuts, sweet wine, and spices signifying the sweetness of freedom), and three (or four) cups of sweet wine are

consumed. The fourth (or fifth) cup is left untouched for Elijah the Prophet to come through the open door and sit in his special chair (Elijah's Chair), in eager anticipation of the long-awaited coming of the Messiah.

It is extremely significant that during the Seder the officiating person (usually the father), declares that this meal is a memorial of what happened to the Jews in Egypt: how God, in His great mercy and love, freed them from terrible slavery and prevailed on Pharaoh to let them go free ... even out of the Land of Egypt. The leader/father then enjoins all present to actualize, so to speak, their presence ... as if they themselves had been present at the original events. In other words, the Passover service makes present the events in Egypt of long ago! We shall see that this has crucial significance for the celebration of the Eucharist.

The Eucharist

The Eucharist was originally called "the breaking of the bread", which is very close to its origins, namely, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, as per above. It actualizes, i.e. makes present the blood-sacrifice of Jesus in a non-bloody way every time the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is offered, as if we were present at Calvary itself.

So, how do the Jewish and Catholic rites compare?

Church and Synagogue as a Building

Due to the great persecution of the early Christian Church by some of the Roman Emperors, there were no church buildings until Emperor Constantine. He granted not only toleration to the Christians, but made the Christian Faith the official religion of the Roman Empire early in the 4th century AD.

Christians worshipped in each other's homes, and in particular, the priests offered the Eucharist on a normal table, just as a Jewish father would celebrate the Passover liturgy at Pesach (Hebrew for Passover).

However, during the great persecutions, many Christians literally gathered underground, in what we call the catacombs: sometimes vast underground corridors, galleries and larger spaces, all laboriously hewn out by countless devout early Christians, as can be seen to this day in some parts of Rome.

Not surprisingly, it was in the liturgies and other religious practices in the seclusion of the catacombs, "the underground church" of Rome, that we find many of the primitive antecedents of today's Catholic religious practices.

Jesus addressed these words to St. Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, first Bishop of Rome, and Pope:

“So I now say to you: ‘You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven: whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven.’” (Mt 16:13-19);

and again,

“Feed my lambs ... feed my sheep.” (Jn 21:15 & 17).

These words virtually guaranteed that Roman practices were to become universal practices of the Catholic ('katholikos' being Greek for 'universal') Church, eventually throughout the whole world.

Let us look at some of these practices.

During the great persecutions in Rome, as the martyrs were buried in wall-niches, the habit grew to celebrate the Eucharist on top of the tomb, naturally facing the wall. Hence, until the reforms of Vatican II, at least in the Western or Latin Rite, the priest celebrated Mass facing the altar, which was set against the wall, if not in the wall, as formerly in the catacombs! The word 'mass' comes from "Ite missa est", said at the end of the celebration, which means "go, you are sent forth" in Latin.

Since Vatican II, we have returned to the pre-catacomb altar-table, which is none other than the ordinary house table used by the Jewish family to celebrate the Passover or the weekly Sabbath meal. The custom (which was formerly a requirement for all altars) of placing a relic of a martyr or saint in the altar stone, derives from the celebration of the Eucharist over a martyr's tomb in the catacombs of ancient Rome.

What of the altar cloth, which is invariably white? Again, this reflects none other than the white linen table cloth that every good Jewish mother would spread on her table.

What of the candles? Since the Council of Trent in the 16th century until Vatican II, there were six candles on the Catholic altar of the Western Rite. However, since Vatican II we normally see two candles, either at each end of the table, or together like in the Jewish home, where it is the privilege and duty of the mother to light the Sabbath (and Passover) candles and say a blessing over them. Christians may be unaware of the reason why there are in fact two candles instead of just one. The Rabbis generally explain this by saying that it is due to the fact that there are two versions of the Ten commandments in the Tanach, one in Shemot (from the first Hebrew word meaning 'Names': "These are the names of the sons of Israel.."), found in Exodus 20:1-17. The other version is to be found in Dvarim (from the first Hebrew word meaning 'words': "These are the words spoken beyond the Jordan..." from Deuteronomy 5:6-21. There is only one word in Hebrew different between these two versions!

If we look to the back of the synagogue or Western Rite church, what do we find just beyond the entrance of most Catholic churches? There is a holy water font, into which the faithful dip three or more fingers of their right hand in order to trace the sign of the Cross on themselves. Most Catholics would be pleasantly surprised when entering an Orthodox synagogue, since usually just inside the door, they will find not just a miniature, symbolic receptacle, but a proper bowl with water, a piece of soap and a towel. The purpose of this is for the worshipper to wash not only the hands, but the forearms as well, so that he or she can approach God in a clean state on the inside, as well as on the outside.

Following ablutions in the vestibule, and before the worshipper moves into the prayer-hall proper, he or she will notice writing above the entrance to the synagogue. It sometimes says in gold lettering Baruch HaBa BeShem Adonai (Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord), quoting verse 26 of Psalm 118, the processional psalm par excellence for the Feast of Tabernacles, which commemorates the wanderings of the Israelites for forty years in the desert with Moses.

Christians will note the significance of this verse to Jesus when he said that unless we say "Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord", he will not return. Of course, for Christians it will be Jesus coming for the second time, whereas for Jews who have not yet accepted him it will be the first time (Lk 13:35).

As we move into the prayer-hall of the Orthodox or Liberal synagogue, we shall note at least three major features:

1. At the far end is a velvet curtain covering the 'aron ha-kodesh', that is the Holy Ark which contains the precious scrolls of the Torah, loosely translated as "The Law", i.e. the first five books of Mosheh (Moses). The inscription (in Hebrew) above the curtain often says "Remember in front of Whom you stand!" Furthermore, above this inscription, and in the middle, are invariably the two tablets of the Ten commandments, inscribed of course in Hebrew.
2. In front of the Ark hangs the eternal light, symbolizing the presence of the Sh(e)chinah, the Divine Presence. Catholics will be quite familiar with such a sanctuary lamp, which in all Catholic churches signifies the Divine Presence of Jesus in the reserved Blessed Sacrament in the Tabernacle.
3. Standing prominently before the Ark is the Bimah, which acts as a lectern-cum-pulpit. During the service, after the curtain in front of the Ark is drawn, the Torah scroll is removed with great reverence and care (for, should the person removing it accidentally drop the scroll, the whole congregation will be obliged to fast for a given time!) and is laid here. First, the scroll is 'undressed': the crown is removed, then the breastplate (symbolizing the High Priest's breastplate), then the velvet cover, with its tinkling silver bells on the hem, again replicating the 'Cohen ha-Gadol': the outer garments of the High Priest, and silver bells. The

Torah scroll is then rolled out and the daily reading chanted by the lector with the use of a silver pointer. The Word of God is too sacred to touch. Perhaps Christians can learn from such veneration accorded to the Word of God by the Jewish people.

No doubt Christians will identify more closely with a Liberal or Progressive synagogue, since in appearance and practice it is closer to their mode of worship.

The congregation is mixed, and sometimes even has a female rabbi! On the other hand, in Orthodox synagogues, women are always separated from the men, and usually pray in an upstairs gallery, while no female rabbis are permitted.

Some years ago, having taken some members of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal at their request to the magnificent Toorak Road Synagogue in Melbourne on the Day of Atonement, the women naturally had to go upstairs to the women's gallery. Afterwards some of the Catholic women were aghast as to the goings-on among some of the Jewish women. These could not resist catching up with all the news, from the past year no doubt. The commotion was at times so great that some of the Jewish men below looked up and asked the women to keep silent, since they themselves were engaged in prayer, which was taken very seriously. It immediately reminded the Christians who were present of St. Paul's urging that women should keep silent in the church. As an Orthodox Jew, he was no doubt speaking from personal experience!

On another occasion, I was asked to take a group of Catholics to the Progressive Synagogue in Bentleigh, also in Melbourne.

Our guide was a very outgoing youngish lady, who, near the end of the tour told us that recently, when a class from a Catholic primary School visited the synagogue, one of the boys said: "This is all very familiar, but where are the Stations of the Cross?" No doubt the Sister in charge would have explained to the young man the subtle and not-so-subtle differences between Jewish and Christian theology on this point!

Speaking of what a synagogue does not have, it is essential to point out first and foremost that there is no altar. The reason for it is simply because sacrifice was only permitted for the Jewish people in one place only, and that was at the Temple in Jerusalem. Once the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, no more sacrifices ... at least not with the shedding of blood, were permitted.

In fact the nature of the Temple and of the synagogue was essentially different. The Temple was primarily the place of sacrifice, although it had other functions, too. The synagogue developed mainly as a place of study of the Scriptures (consequently, in Yiddish the synagogue is referred to as a 'shul', i.e. a school), as well as for private and congregational prayer (for the latter, a 'minyan', or quorum of ten men was required).

In time however, the blood sacrifices of the Temple were substituted by prayers, and what is

more, at the times of the former sacrifices at the Temple. Thus, the Morning Prayer in the Orthodox Jewish service reflects the morning sacrificial offering of the Temple. Likewise, the Afternoon Prayer service mirrors the afternoon sacrifice of the Temple. And finally, the Evening Prayer service of the synagogue reflects the evening sacrifice of the Temple.

The Second Commandment decrees that "You shall not make yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything in heaven or on earth beneath or in the waters under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them." (Exodus 20:5, Deuteronomy 5:8-9). Consequently, no representations of humans or animals are permitted in synagogues.

There have been enormous past controversies about 'images', such as Iconoclasm in the early Church, as well as during the Protestant Reformation. This continues to this day, though in a much lower key. Without wishing to go deeply into the controversy, suffice it to say that the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Monophysite* and some Anglican Churches use pictures and even statues for devotional purposes. This is not the case in the Eastern Orthodox and Monophysite Churches where only flat icons are used and not statues. It is to venerate, that is, honor, the men and women of God, His Saints, but not to worship them, since that would be idolatry. This is based partly on the fact that above the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem, stood the two Cherubim made of gold, with wings almost touching, above which was God's Mercy Seat. Even though God commanded Moses to place the two angels' statues on top of the Ark of the Covenant, no Israelite would dream of worshiping these statues, since the Jew must worship the Creator, not the created! Likewise, any Catholic, or any other Christian, may not worship anything created by man, but only God, Who is One in three Persons: Father, Son and Holy spirit.

* i.e. The Coptic (Egyptian), Syrian and Armenian Churches which did not accept the council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, although they deny that they only believe in the divine nature and not the human nature of Jesus.