



The following question, concerning the way we celebrate the Lord's Supper, has been asked by an obviously thoughtful young man. It is a query which, I think, will find an echo in the minds of many of us and may help to focus our thinking on what we do when we sit at the Lord's Table.

'Matt.26 v.26 records that, "**Jesus took bread and blessed it.**" We also often ask God to bless the bread. What do we mean by this, and what form do we expect the blessing to take?'

First, I think it would be useful to look at the precise wording used by the New Testament writers when they record what was done in the Upper Room that night, when the Lord Jesus celebrated the Passover with His disciples, and then proceeded to institute His own memorial Supper, because it will help us to see exactly what – or whom – it was that the Lord 'blessed'.

The Gospel Accounts

Beginning with Matthew and the statement in the verse to which the question refers, we find that the word '*it*' is in italics. Now, I feel sure that you know that, when, in the New Testament, words are *italicised*, we are meant to understand that they do not occur in the Greek text but have been supplied by the translators in order to provide what they regard as a clearer translation into English. Sometimes they succeed, but at other times they miss the true meaning of the text and convey a wrong impression. Unfortunately, this is what has happened in the 'Authorized Version', of Matt.26: 26.

The accurate rendering of the verse is found in Mark's account, ch.14 v.22, which says that "**Jesus took bread, and blessed.**" Luke's version reports, "**And He took bread and gave thanks.**" (Luke 2: 19). From John's account we learn nothing about what occurred at either of the meals. He only records what happened '*before the feast of the Passover*' (ch.13 v.1), and tells us, in the next verse, '*and the supper being ended....*'

Paul's Account

The one remaining account is that of Paul in 1st Cor. 11, and it is of very special interest to us because;

- 1) Paul states that he had received it from the Lord Jesus in person.
- 2) Since 1st Corinthians was written about 56 A.D., it pre-dates the four Gospels and makes this the earliest account we have of the institution of the Lord's Supper.

The apostle tells us – on the authority of the Lord Jesus Himself – that He '*took bread: and when he had given thanks...*' (v.23-24). So the question is, did Jesus bless the bread? And, again, should we, in celebrating the Lord's Supper, ask God to bless either the bread or the cup?

The Celebration Of The Passover.

A little research into the traditional manner in which the Passover meal was celebrated, as described in rabbinical literature, proves both interesting and enlightening, and reveals that, by the time of Jesus, the ritual had undergone quite extensive change.

The Simplicity of the First Passover Meal

The description in Exodus 12, of that historic night when God '*passed over*' Egypt, reveals that the 'first Passover meal' was a very simple affair, because it was hastily prepared and eaten in readiness for a journey. Even today there are elements in the ritual which, although quite basic, are accepted as compulsory and essential to a proper celebration of the feast.

According to Rabban Gamaliel, the words '*Passover*', '*unleavened bread*' and '*bitter herbs* must be spoken during the feast, and, '*whoever has not said the verses concerning these three things at Passover, has not fulfilled his obligation*'. There is no proper celebration of Passover.

However, as might be expected, with the passage of time the '*Haggadah*', (the Passover ritual), became more formal and elaborate, as other symbolic features were added. For instance, in Exodus ch. 12, there is no mention of the use of wine, or any significance attached to it, on the night of God's Passover. It is considered that the wine was added to the commemoration, either during, or after, the return from the Babylonian captivity. According to Rabbi Dr. Isadore Epstein, the wine, along with extra items of food, such as shank-bones and eggs, were added to symbolize and express the joy of Redemption from slavery, and

the meal itself was further enriched by the addition of a sauce made of raisins and dates, which is said to represent the clay with which the Israelites were compelled to make bricks for the Egyptians.

The Feast

Let me briefly describe the manner in which the Passover meal eventually came to be celebrated. The family members – perhaps including guests - recline on couches around the Passover Table, and, after the Master of the Feast -(this would be the father, as head of the family)- has given thanks, the celebration begins with the sharing of a cup of wine mixed with water. Arthur Hertzberg states that this is the first of four cups of wine that are drunk in the course of the Feast.

This is followed by the ritual washing of hands, after which the Passover meal is brought to the Table. The meal itself consists of roast lamb, unleavened bread (the '*matzoth*'), and bitter herbs, as commanded in Exodus 12: 8. These 'herbs', watercress, chicory, lettuce, endive, dandelion and sorrel, are eaten as a salad, which, because of its bitterness, serves as a reminder of the bitter years of slavery endured by the Hebrews in Egypt.

The Master of the Feast then gives thanks for the bitter herbs and the fruit, expressing gratitude to the Creator who causes them to grow in the earth:

"Praised are You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine".

The Teaching of the Children

At this point, the dishes containing the food are taken away from the table, and the children are taught the meaning of Passover, in obedience to the command found in Exodus 12:26-27. The food is then brought back to the Table, and the guests drink the second cup of wine and sing Psalms 110 and 115. This is followed by a second washing of hands, during which another traditional prayer is spoken.

***"Praised are You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe,
Who brings forth bread out of the earth".***

The Master of the Feast then breaks a cake of unleavened bread, and gives a half to be divided among the guests. The remaining half is eaten, with the guests dipping pieces of it into the sauce (the '*charoseth*'), and eaten with the bitter herbs. Refer to John 13:26. (The previous day was the day when the Peace Offering would have been offered, and, according to custom, a part of that offering would have been returned to the worshipper, to be shared with family or friends. This was usually eaten at this point in the Passover celebration, although it was not a compulsory item in the ritual).

Afterwards, the Passover lamb is eaten, and there follows a third hand-washing ceremony and another expression of thanks. Then the guests drink the third cup of wine, which is called '*the cup of blessing*', so called, because they all thanked God for His goodness. (Compare 1st Cor. 10:16).

Finally, fourth cup of wine is shared, and, because it is accompanied by the singing of Psalms 115 to 118, this is known as '*the cup of Hallel*', (or '*Praise*'), and the ceremony ends with a final prayer.

What - or whom – did the Lord bless?

He did not ask God to bestow some sort of sanctifying 'blessing' on either the unleavened bread, or the fruit of the vine. When He prayed before giving the bread and grape juice to His disciples, there seems little doubt that He was following the Passover practice of expressing praise and thanks to the Father, and He was teaching the disciples to express praise and gratitude to Him, for the redemption that He was about to secure for them, by the offering of Himself as their Passover Lamb.

The 'blessing' about which we should think, is of the nature of that of the Psalmist in Psalm 103. It is a Psalm of pure praise, the very reading of which is a blessing.

"Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless His holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; Who healeth all thy diseases; Who redeemeth thy life from destruction..."

For us, then the Lord's Supper presents an opportunity for the offering of personal thanks, worship and praise to God, for the giving us a Saviour. It is a time for the expression of our gratitude for everything that the bread and the fruit of the vine represent.