

**Matthew Colvin**  
***The Lost Supper:***  
***Revisiting Passover and***  
***the Origins of the Eucharist***

(Lanham: Lexington Books / Fortress Academic, 2019), hardcover, 173 + xiii pp.

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The second-century bishop Melito of Sardis was a master of typological interpretation. His approach, extending that of St Paul, involved seeing diverse elements in the Scriptures of Israel as “types,” or indirect representations, of the complete reality manifest in Christ. Melito’s *Peri Pascha*, a rhetorical tour de force on Passover, identified the significance of what happened to the biblical people of Israel as applying fully to Christ, who is “the Pascha of our salvation” (*Peri Pascha* 69). Melito even derives the meaning of the feast from the Greek verb *paskhein*, to argue that its true sense is that of the suffering of the Lord (*Peri Pascha* 46-47).

Colvin embraces a suggestion published in 1966 by David Daube that focused on Melito’s statement that the Lord is the one who “reached from heaven” (*aphikomenos ek ouranou* [*Peri Pascha* 66, cf. 86]) to take on suffering so as to kill death itself. This profound confidence in the pre-existence of Christ, richly developed by Melito, was taken in a different, historical direction by Daube, who associated the aorist participle of *aphikneomai* with the *aphiqoman* of Judaism’s Passover. The *aphiqoman* is a piece of unleavened bread hidden during the meal so as to be consumed at the end; the term is usually derived from the Greek *epikommon*, a reference to something after dinner. In this reconstruction, the Haggadah in the time of Jesus already associated the unleavened bread with the messiah, so that Jesus identified himself as he messiah when he said “This is my body” (28, in Colvin’s citation of Daube).

If Melito indeed thought in those terms, the typology might or might not have related to what practitioners of the Haggadah thought. The origins of the Haggadah, and the practice of hiding the *aphiqoman* until the close of the meal, are not fully clarified and of uncertain date. Nonetheless Colvin follows the lead of Israel Yuval and Deborah Bleicher Carmichael in building out Daube’s case (itself a recapitulation of Robert Eisler’s argument from 1925).

Colvin tries to argue that this meaning of the *aphiqoman* lies in plain sight, if only we look past the differing meanings accorded the Eucharist within the New Testament and early Christian literature. He claims that an “emphasis on diversity has led many scholars to turn away from analysis of the Jewish cultural and linguistic background” (xi). This, of course, is a misleading statement, since many scholars of the New Testament, from Hans Lietzmann to the present writer, have related the practice of different meals in Judaism to Eucharistic practice. Indeed, a shortcoming of much scholarship on the Eucharist is the apparent assumption that Passover presents the only case of a theologically significant meal in Judaism.

Colvin's appeal to univocal origins leads him simply to cancel the dispute over the difference between the calendars of John and the Synoptics by appeal to the work of Theodor Zahn in 1908 (17-18). Colvin argues that the appearance of a discrepancy over when Christ died is a simple mistake that generations of scholars have made in regard to the reference to the day of preparation in John.<sup>1</sup> That is not the day before Passover, he argues, but Friday in the week of Passover. His limited remarks, however, do not take account of the overt statement, only found in John, that correlates the paschal offering with the death of Christ in that in both those cases not a bone was broken (Exodus 12:46; John 19:36). Melito alludes to this connection (*Peri Pascha* 12), but it eludes Colvin's notice.

In addition, to blandly maintain that because it is possible to translate Mark's Gospel into Aramaic, it was written in Aramaic (2) takes no account of long established features of Markan style in Koine. Such shortcuts follow a stream of recent British Evangelicalism, reflected in Colvin's argument against diversity: “the church in the apostolic age was highly mobile and interconnected” (1). This is one of the few assertions I have encountered during the past year to the effect that greater mobility and interconnectedness guarantee greater unity. In any case the variance of Eucharistic presentations among the Gospels, Paul, and the *Didache* finds no focused discussion here.

Colvin presses his unitary Christianity back to Jesus himself, arguing that “This is my body” means that the *aphiqoman* is the messiah, with whom he identifies himself (24-35, 56). Yet any Haggadah that Jesus used would of course have been framed prior to the destruction of the Temple, an event which exerted a profound influence on the practice of the Passover. In order to speak of religious meals (and not only paschal celebrations) in Second Temple Judaism, account would need to be taken of the Dead Sea Scrolls, for example. They, of course, inevitably bring us into the deep diversity of Judaism within that period. The principal scholar of that variety, Jacob Neusner (including Neusner's analysis that problematizes reference to the “messiah”) is not discussed in this regard, and his work with Lawrence Schiffman, in *A Comparative Handbook to the Gospel of Mark. Comparisons with*

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<sup>1</sup> At moments I have attempted to soften some of my criticism of Colvin's work. But then I run across sentences such as, “It is truly remarkable how so simple an omission of philological due diligence has grown legs and traveled through the scholarship” (18 n. 16). Zahn's argument represents more ad hoc reasoning than philology, and to accuse the many scholars who have declined to follow him as lacking in “due diligence” is captious.

*Pseudepigrapha, the Qumran Scrolls, and Rabbinic Literature: The New Testament Gospels in their Judaic Contexts* 1 (2009; of which I was general editor) seems not to have been consulted.

Although the argument of this book is not worked out in the historical and philological terms it sets out for itself, the author takes us through a selective survey of a vast country. If his mapping appears incomplete, he nonetheless shows us what an interesting journey awaits the willing traveler, and some of his textual discussion is fascinating.

Most relevant for readers of *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, however, is Colvin's failure to discuss the argument that the *aphiqoman* relates to the messiah and to Jesus within the practice and apologetic of Messianic Judaism.<sup>2</sup> This development is all the more pertinent in light of Melito's development of the charge of Israel's role in Christ's suffering and death, an emphatic dimension of *Peri Pascha*. Subtlety is not evident when he makes Israel responsible for the crucifixion (*Peri Pascha* 75); why Melito should not actually mention the *aphiqoman* or its alleged meaning remains a mystery according to the hypothesis under review.

Although the argument of this book is framed as if it were historical, in fact it is rooted in typology. Colvin happily cites Paul as providing the "coup de grace" of his argument, since Paul identified Christ and Passover (119). That, however, is after all an example of Pauline typology.

Typological argument still has its attraction, as its deployment in contemporary Messianic Judaism illustrates. To make a typological argument of this sort into an historical argument, however, would require that the origins of the Haggadah be elucidated; that the practice, etymology, and dating of the *aphiqoman* be determined; and that Judaic meal practices be assessed. All the while, the issue of the degree to which typology may be inherently supersessionist needs to be addressed, as does the prospect that transferring typology into history exacerbates any supersessionist tendencies. Fortunately, all these are vectors of analysis that have been explored, and those intrigued by suggestions in the present book may readily look into them further.

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<sup>2</sup> See John Dulin, "Reversing Rupture: Evangelicals' Practice of Jewish Rituals and Processes of Protestant Inclusion," *Anthropological Quarterly* 88 (2015): 601-34, as well as the widely cited article by Paul Sumner, "He Who is Coming. The Hidden Afikoman," *Hebrew Streams*, <http://www.hebrew-streams.org/works/judaism/afikoman.html>.