

The Jewish Roots of Holy Week

1. Palm Sunday

Jesus' Triumphal Entry

And when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to *the Mount of Olives*, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find an ass tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and he will send them immediately.” This took place to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet, saying, ⁵“Tell the daughter of Zion, *Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on an ass, and on a colt, the foal of an ass.*” [Zech 9:9] The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the ass and the colt, and put their garments on them, and he sat thereon. Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road, and *others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.* ⁹And the crowds that went before him and that followed him shouted, “*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!*” (Matthew 21:1-9)

The King Comes into the City and Up to the Altar with “Branches”

Save us (Hebrew *hoshiah na*) *we beseech thee, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech thee, give salvation! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! We bless you from the house of the Lord. The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar!* (Psalm 118:25-27)

2-3. Monday and Tuesday

Jesus Curses the Fig Tree

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance *a fig tree* in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. *And he said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.”* And his disciples heard it...

As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, “Master, look! The fig tree which you cursed has withered.” (Mark 11:12-14, 20-21)

Ancient Jewish Tradition: The Tree of Knowledge—A Fig Tree

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and *they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.* (Genesis 3:6-7)

[Eve said:] At that very moment my eyes were opened, and I knew that I was naked of the righteousness with which I had been clothed... I looked for leaves... so that I might cover my shame, but I did not find (any) from the trees of Paradise... except (those) of *the fig tree only. And I took its leaves and made for myself skirts; they were from the same plants of which I ate.*” (*Life of Adam and Eve* 20:1, 4-5)

The Jewish Roots of Holy Week

4. Spy Wednesday

Jesus is Betrayed by Judas for Thirty Pieces of Silver

[Jesus] said to his disciples, “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of man will be delivered up to be crucified.” Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and took counsel together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But they said, “Not during the feast, lest there be a tumult among the people...” *Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot*, went to the chief priests and said, “What will you give me if I deliver him to you?” And they paid him *thirty pieces of silver*. *And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.* (Matthew 26:1-5, 14-16)

Joseph is Betrayed by Judah for Twenty Pieces of Silver

Then they [the 10 sons of Jacob] sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then *Judah* said to his brothers, “*What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood?* Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers heeded him. Then Midianite traders passed by; and they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for *twenty shekels of silver*; and they took Joseph to Egypt. (Genesis 37:24-28)

5. Holy Thursday (Afternoon)

Jesus Sends Peter and John to Prepare the Passover

Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which *the passover lamb* had to be sacrificed. *So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, “Go and prepare the passover for us, that we may eat it.”* They said to him, “Where will you have us prepare it?” He said to them, “Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house which he enters, and tell the householder, ‘The Teacher says to you, Where is the guest room, where I am to eat the passover with my disciples?’ And he will show you a large upper room furnished; there make ready.” And they went, and found it as he had told them; and *they prepared the Passover.* (Luke 22:7-13)

The Sacrifice of the Passover Lambs

The Passover-offering was slaughtered in three groups... When the first group entered in and the Temple Court was filled, the gates of the Temple Court were closed... The priests stood in rows and in their hands were basins of silver and basins of gold. In one row all the basins were of silver and in another row all the basins were of gold... An Israelite slaughtered his offering and the priest caught *the blood*. The priest passed the basin to his fellow, and he to his fellow, each receiving a full basin and giving back an empty one. *The priest nearest to the Altar tossed the blood in one action against the base...* When the first group went out the second group came in; and when the second group went out the third group came in... [In the meantime] the Levites sang the *Hallel*. If they finished it, they sang it anew... (Mishnah *Pesahim* 5:5-7; trans. H. Danby)

The Jewish Roots of Holy Week

The “Crucifixion” of the Passover Lamb

For the lamb, which is roasted, is roasted and dressed up *in the form of a cross*. For one spit is transfixed right through from the lower parts up to the head, and one across the back, to which are attached the legs of the lamb. (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, 40; trans. ANF)

Joseph Tabory: “An examination of the rabbinic evidence... seems to show that in Jerusalem the Jewish paschal lamb was offered in a manner which resembled a crucifixion.”¹

¹ Joseph Tabory, “The Crucifixion of the Paschal Lamb,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 86:3-4 (1996): 395-406.

The Jewish Roots of Holy Week 5. Holy Thursday (Night)

Before the Supper: Jesus Washes the Disciples' Feet

When he had washed their feet, and taken his garments, and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. *If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.* Amen, amen, I say to you, *a servant* is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. (John 13:12-16)

Why “Maundy” Thursday? (Latin *mandatum*) (Maundy Thursday)

*A new commandment (Latin *mandatum novum*) I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.* By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35)

The Last Supper: Jesus is the New Passover Lamb

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take, eat; *this is my body.*” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you; for *this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.* I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.” And *when they had sung a hymn*, they went out to the Mount of Olives. (Matthew 26:26-30)

What Did Jesus *Sing* at the Last Supper?

What shall I render to the Lord for all his bounty to me?

I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord,

I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people.

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.

O Lord, I am thy servant; I am thy servant, the son of thy handmaid.

Thou hast loosed my bonds. I will offer to thee *the sacrifice of thanksgiving...*

(Psalm 116:12-17)

The Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane

And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to *the Mount of Olives...* Then Jesus went with them to *a place called Gethsemane*, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here, while I go yonder and pray.” And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.” (Matthew 26:30, 36-46)

Ancient Jewish Tradition: The Tree of Life—an Olive Tree

And Adam said to Eve, “Rise and go with my son Seth to the regions of Paradise... Perhaps [God] will have mercy and send his angel to *the tree of his mercy* [= the Tree of Life], *from which flows the oil of life*, and will give you a little of it with which to anointed me, that I might have rest from these pains by which I am wasting away.” (*Life of Adam and Eve* 36:1-2; trans. in OTP 2)

The Jewish Roots of Holy Week 6. Good Friday

The Blood and Water from the Side of Jesus

When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfil the scripture), “I thirst.” A bowl full of common wine stood there; so *they put a sponge full of the wine on hyssop* and held it to his mouth. *When Jesus had received the wine, he said, “It is finished”;* and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Since it was the day of Preparation, in order to prevent the bodies from remaining on the cross on the Sabbath..., the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him; but when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. *But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth—that you also may believe.* For these things took place that the scripture might be fulfilled, “Not a bone of him shall be broken” [Exod 12:46]. (John 19:26-37)

The Blood and Water from the Side of the Temple

So these High Priests, upon the coming of their feast which is called the Passover, when they slay their sacrifices, from the ninth hour to the eleventh... found the number of sacrifices was 256,500... (Josephus, *War*, 6.423-37; trans. W. Whiston)

At the south-western corner [of the Altar] there were two holes like two narrow nostrils by which *the blood that was poured* over the western base and the southern base *used to run down and mingle in the water-channel and flow out into the brook Kidron.* (Mishnah *Middoth* 3:2; trans. H. Danby)

7. Holy Saturday

The Sabbath: Jesus Rests in the Tomb

They took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where he was crucified there was *a garden, and in the garden a new tomb where no one had ever been laid.* So *because of the Jewish day of Preparation [=for the Sabbath],* as the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there. (John 19:40-41)

The Catechism on Holy Saturday and Jesus’ Descent into Hades

“The gospel was preached even to the dead.” (1 Peter 4:6). *The descent into hell brings the Gospel message of salvation to complete fulfillment.* This is the last phase of Jesus’ messianic mission, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance: the spread of Christ’s redemptive work to all men of all times and all places, for all who are saved have been made sharers in the redemption. Christ went down into the depths of death so that “the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live...” (CCC 634)

The Jewish Roots of Holy Week

Ancient Christian Homily on Holy Saturday

Today [=Holy Saturday] a great silence reigns on earth, a great silence and a great stillness. A great silence because the King is asleep. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began.... He has gone to search for Adam, our first father, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, he has gone to free from sorrow Adam in his bonds and Eve, captive with him—He who is both their God and the son of Eve.... “I am your God, who for your sake have become your son.... I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be a prisoner in hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead.” (quoted in CCC 635)

8. Easter Sunday

The Resurrection on “the First Day of the Week”

Now *after the sabbath*, toward *the dawn of the first day of the week*, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulchre. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen, as he said... (Matthew 28:1-6)

The “First Day of the Week” in Jewish Scripture

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. *And God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.* And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, *one day*.... [Six days of Creation].

...Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on *the seventh day* God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. *So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it*, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation. (Genesis 1:1-5, 2:1-2)

The Catechism on Sunday and the Resurrection

Jesus rose from the dead “on the first day of the week.” *Because it is the “first day,” the day of Christ’s Resurrection recalls the first creation. Because it is the “eighth day” following the sabbath, it symbolizes the new creation ushered in by Christ’s Resurrection.* For Christians it has become the first of all days, the first of all feasts, the Lord’s Day—Sunday: “We all gather on the day of the sun, for it is the first day [after the Jewish sabbath, but also the first day] when God, separating matter from darkness, made the world; and on this same day Jesus Christ our Savior rose from the dead.” (CCC 2174, quoting St. Justin Martyr)