

Notes on Passover Talk 2: Passover in the Tanaitic Sources

1. The Mishnah, composed about 250 CE, and its companion text, the Tosefta, both record an outline of the earliest Passover seders.
2. The very first mishnah already provides a steep departure from the Biblical texts we learned last week. First, it mentions that we need to “recline” to eat the Passover meal--undoubtedly a reference to Roman banquets where the guests lay on couches at mealtime. This contradicts the biblical text which says that we should eat quickly with our loins girded ready to flee from Egypt. Second, it mentions the requirement that we drink four cups of wine--whereas the biblical text says nothing about wine being a requirement.
3. The third mishnah mentions a requirement for *bazeret* which is not recorded as such in the Bible, but it could be linked to the biblical requirement of “bitter herbs” mentioned in Numbers. It then goes on to mention a requirement for something called *haroset* which is not defined and has no counterpart in the Torah. Two rabbis dispute with each other over whether *haroset* should be deemed a requirement, a *mitzvah*.
4. The 4th mishnah contains the story familiar to us from the Haggadah called “The Four Questions.” The text is very similar to what we find in most versions of the Haggadah today, but the one about “dipping” is slightly different. Most of us say, “On all other nights we do not dip even once, this night twice” while the Mishnah says “On all other nights we dip once, but on this night twice.” The difference apparently reflects different customs in Israel from Babylonia. This mishnah concludes with the instruction that we begin the story of Passover from, “My father was a wandering Aramean.”
5. The fifth mishnah quotes Rabban Gamliel’s famous dictum that three things must be mentioned at the Seder: *Pesah*, *Matzah*, and *Maror*. While all three of these are biblical, it is interesting that the text explains “Pesah” as related to the angel of death passing over (thus omitting) the houses of the Israelites rather than connecting it to the sacrificial meat which, of course, was unavailable in the time of the Mishnah. What follows are two quotes that will be directly copied into the Haggadah.
6. The sixth mishnah begins a discussion of how to incorporate the ancient liturgical unit called “Hallel” into the Passover service. There are disagreements about how to do this, but all the rabbis agree that the Passover meal should be situated in the midst of the Hallel, part of it recited before, part of it recited after, the meal.
7. From the seventh mishnah, we learn that the meal is situated not just in the middle of the Hallel, but also between the 2nd and 3rd cups of wine. The Mishnah kindly tells us we can drink as many cups of wine at dinner as we please! But it is not clear how that comports with the idea of eating quickly with our “loins girded” ready to flee from Egypt!

The seventh mishnah also includes the instruction to fill the fourth cup, and it is here that we learn that we should recite “Blessing of the Song”--a reference to the prayers usually recited at dawn. This is evidence that at least in some communities, the Seder went all night long!

8. The eighth mishnah contains one of the most mysterious instructions for the Seder: You must not depart from the Passover service “*afiqoman*.” The word *afiqoman* is not explained. The Tosefta suggests that it means some sort of desert--in other words, after the Seder meal is completed, people should eat no more. The Tosefta also includes instructions for playing games with children to keep them awake, and our later tradition combined that with the *afiqoman* to make the *afiqoman* the basis of a game of hide and seek for our children. The real explanation for *afiqoman* will have to await another seminar!