

Charoseth

Charoseth is a tasty concoction of varying consistencies and textures. It is used twice during the Seder. The first time is immediately following the blessing and partaking of matzah and preceding the special Passover meal. At this time, the celebrants dip the bitter herbs in it and eat the two together without anything else. The second time immediately follows the first. It is again combined with bitter herbs, but this time the two are placed on a piece of matzah and eaten as the Hillel Sandwich. Later on in the evening, after the Seder, many non-Orthodox families will enjoy the sweet charoseth on matzah as a tasty snack. For many children this is one of the highlights of Passover food.

The symbolism of charoseth is rich in history and meaning equal to the sweetness of its taste. Its two most prominent features are its sweetness and color. While there are many different recipes for charoseth depending on whether one comes from the Ashkenazi or Sephardi tradition, the basic recipe includes apples, chopped nuts, and sweet red wine. The apples and wine provide a natural sweetness, but many celebrants add cinnamon or additional fruits, particularly dates and oranges, to enhance the flavor. However, it is the apples and the red wine that are most prominent and important in the mixture. It is believed that the apples remind celebrants of how Israelite women gave birth to children under apple trees on the outskirts of the cities so that they might be hidden from the Egyptians who would kill any newborn males.¹ Perhaps even Moses was born under such conditions.

The sweetness of a newborn child mixed with the bitterness of slavery and conditions of the birth provides the Passover celebrant a vivid reminder of why the bitter herbs are eaten with the charoseth. This odd mixture of bitter and sweet reminds celebrants that in the midst of bitterness (i.e. – slavery or persecution) there is still the longing for the sweetness of freedom as well as the few sweet moments experienced interspersed throughout the bitterness. Ultimately, it reminds Jews that God will not forget His people, but will eventually redeem them and even grant a degree of pleasure and happiness in the midst of their affliction.

The color of charoseth is determined by what is included, but typically the combination of apples, nuts, red wine, cinnamon, and other ingredients produces a reddish-brown concoction. Such a color is reminiscent of the mortar used by the ancient Israelites to bind their self-made bricks in building great cities for Pharaoh. Many believe that the charoseth specifically represents the mortar used to build the great Egyptian treasure cities Pithom and Raamses.² Additionally, some scholars have pointed out a similarity in the roots of the Hebrew words *charoseth* – the root is חרס, and *cheres* – the root is חרש, which refers to potsherd, or fragments of excavated pottery made of clay.³ Although there is an apparent difference between the last character of each root (the last character is on the far left for Hebrew, opposite of English), it should be noted that in Late Hebrew and in

¹ Drucker, Malka. *Passover: A Season of Freedom* (New York: Holiday House, 1981) 37

² Ibid.; Exodus 1:11

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Aramaic, the root of *cheres* matched that of *charoseth*.⁴ Thus, the term charoseth may refer directly as well as metaphorically to the clay that the Israelites typically mixed with either straw, reeds, stubble, or Nile mud, to make their quota of bricks.

A less common tradition is that the reddish color of charoseth due to the red wine originally was meant to represent the blood of the Paschal sacrifice. This idea was especially popular among Christians who believed that the crucifixion of Jesus was the event to which the Paschal sacrifice served as a type. However, during the Middle Ages, this belief among Christians turned into blood libel accusations against Jews – namely that they were killing young Christian children and using their blood as an ingredient for the matzot of Passover. Because of these accusations and a general desire to disassociate Jewish tradition from anything that pertained to Christian belief regarding the messiah-ship of Jesus, this tradition has become virtually non-existent among Jews and some would argue that there never was an associations between charoseth and the blood of the Paschal sacrifice.

With regard to the religious obligation to include charoseth in the Seder, the Mishnah offers contradicting viewpoints. According to Hillel, charoseth is not obligatory while R. Eliezer b. R. Zadok says that it is obligatory.⁵ One may ask: Why the debate? The problem is that charoseth was not specifically declared a part of Passover by God anywhere in the Tanach. Rather, it gradually became integrated into the Seder, even coming to eventually take the place of the Paschal sacrifice as in the case of the Hillel Sandwich. When this adoption took place is hard to judge, but there is evidence that it had at least occurred before the end of the Second Temple Period (516 B.C.E. – 70 C.E.) if we assume as many scholars, Gentile and Jewish, that the Last Supper of Jesus and his disciples was a Passover Seder. When Jesus is asked to identify his betrayer, he replies, “He it is, to whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it.”⁶ A sop is a morsel or mouthful of food soaked or dipped in a liquid.⁷ It is significant to note that charoseth was the common vegetable dip during Greek and Roman times.⁸ Therefore, it is likely that whatever Jesus dipped, he dipped it in charoseth indicating that charoseth was already a part of the Seder before the end of the Second Temple Period (516 B.C.E. – 70 C.E.).

⁴ Brown, Francis, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1996) 360

⁵ *Mishnah*. Pesachim 10:3

⁶ John 13:26

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⁸ Glatzer, Nahum N. *The Passover Haggadah* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979) 8