

Maror/Bitter Herbs

The bitter herbs are one of the three items specifically prescribed by God that were to be eaten during the Passover.¹ Its prominence in the Passover Seder has continued demonstrated by its inclusion on the seder plate and multiple uses during the Seder. A variety of foods may be used, horseradish, romaine lettuce, and watercress being the most common, but whatever is used, it must be included in the group of plants whose common characteristics are “bitterness, possessing sap, with a graying appearance.”² The manner in which the bitter herbs are served is purely a matter of choice (i.e. – wafer slices or ground horseradish, leaves or shredded lettuce); however, it is felt by some scholars that the bitter herb that is placed on the seder plate should be whole.³ This is principally because the bitter herbs on the seder plate are for display, not for consumption.

Unlike the other two items prescribed for the original Passover, unleavened bread and the Paschal sacrifice, which have either evolved or been discontinued, the bitter herbs have maintained its significance and meaning. In fact, its involvement in the Seder has actually grown over time.

The bitter herbs are eaten sitting upright, not reclining as in other times of the Seder when wine is partaken or vegetable greens dipped and eaten. The primary reason for this is that slaves were not allowed to recline as the freemen did when they ate their meals. Because the bitter herbs are a reminder of the bitterness of slavery, participants do not recline, but rather assume the position of slaves. In essence this puts the participant in the place of his or her ancestors fulfilling the command contained in the Haggadah, “In every generation each individual is bound to regard himself as if he personally had gone forth from Egypt.”

The proper amount of bitter herbs is roughly the equivalent to the bulk of one olive. It is dipped in charoseth the first time it is eaten; the second time, it is eaten with charoseth in the Hillel Sandwich. This is interpreted to show that the Israelites were able to withstand the bitterness of slavery because they could taste the sweetness of future deliverance and freedom. Thus, some Jews, after dipping the bitter herbs in charoseth, will shake off the excess so as to simply take the edge off the bitterness rather than equalizing the bitter and the sweet.⁴

The meaning of the bitter herbs is clear. The Mishnah quotes Rabbi Gamaliel (1st Century C.E.) of whom Saul of Tarsus was a disciple, explaining that the bitter herbs draw one’s attention to the condition of the Israelites in Egypt “because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our fathers in Egypt.”⁵ Many other authors have pointed to Exodus 1:14 as the scriptural basis of this explanation.

And they made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and bricks, and in all kinds of work in the field; in all their work they made them serve with rigor.⁶

¹ Exodus 12:8; Numbers 9:11

² *Gemara*, Pesachim 39a

³ Levin, Meyer. *An Israel Haggadah for Passover* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, no date) 30

⁴ Davis, Rabbi Avrohom. *The Metsudah Linear Passover Haggadah* (Hoboken: KTAV Publishing House, 1993) 47

⁵ *Mishnah*. Pesachim 10:5

⁶ Exodus 1:14

Over the years, this interpretation has been almost universally accepted and included in the Haggadah.

For Christians who take an interest in Passover, the bitter herbs carry additional significance. Not only does it represent the bitterness of the Israelites slavery in Egypt, but it may also represent the bitterness experienced by Jesus both in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross. Furthermore, for some it can represent the bitter persecution early Christians received at the hands of the Romans until Christianity was recognized by Constantine (313 C.E.). The relief that came from such recognition is comparable in the eyes of Christians to the relief experienced by the Israelites when finally released from Egypt.

From a Latter-day Saint perspective, the relationship between the bitter herbs and Jesus' suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane and the cross receives an added dimension from latter-day revelation.

For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; but if they would not repent they must suffer even as I; which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit – and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink – nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men.⁷

The beauty of this analogy for Latter-day Saints is that because Jesus partook of the full power of the “bitter cup,” it is not necessary for the human family to do the same. Each person may temper the bitterness brought on through sin with the sweetness of the Atonement, just as those partaking of the bitter herbs at Passover temper the bitterness with a taste of charoseth. Such an analogy may also apply to the Hillel Sandwich, in which the sacrificial lamb – symbolically Jesus; and the unleavened bread – symbolically the pure and unadulterated doctrine of Jesus, offsets the bitterness of the herbs, or symbolically, of sin.

⁷ D&C 19:16-19. *The Doctrine and Covenants of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981)