



BEITZAH

The Roasted Egg of Passover

Is it of Pagan Origin?

Many people who have opted out of Christian holidays like Easter because of their dubious origins are uncomfortable with the idea of having a roasted egg as a symbol on the seder plate. They immediately associate it with the symbolism of pagan fertility rituals. However, once a person is familiar with the intimate details of the biblical sacrificial system that took place in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, it becomes clear how this symbol is a perfect fit for the seder.

In the days of the Holy Temple, there were daily offerings that began and ended the daily functions of the priestly service. In addition to this, each of the special days of the year—Sabbaths and holy days—had additional offerings that were brought alongside the daily offerings. These are called the musaf, or “additional,” offerings. Both of these offerings were communal offerings, meaning that they were not offered by individuals, but rather the community. There was another type of offering,

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however, that individuals could offer on certain holy days. This was called the *chagigah*, or “festive offering.” There is an entire tractate in the Mishnah dedicated to clarifying the laws associated with it.

This offering is derived from a contradiction in the two passages in the Torah that describe the Pesach offering. Exodus 12 and Deuteronomy 16 give conflicting instructions regarding the offering to be given during this time:

Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight ... They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted (from **צלה**, *tzalah*) on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted (from **צלה**, *tzalah*), its head with its legs and its inner parts. (Exodus 12:3–6, 8–9)

And you shall offer the Passover sacrifice to the LORD your God, from the flock or the herd, at the place that the LORD will choose, to make his name dwell there ... And you shall cook (from **בשל**, *bashal*) it and eat it at the place that the LORD your God will choose. (Deuteronomy 16:2, 7)

The problems between these two passages revolve mainly around two aspects of the Passover offerings. The first is that according to Exodus, the offering can only be “from the sheep or from the goats.” However, the passage in Deuteronomy states that it may be “from the flock or the herd,” implying that cattle are also an acceptable offering. The second problem is that Exodus restricts the method by which the offering may be cooked, saying that it may only be “roasted on fire,” and not “boiled in water.” The passage in Deuteronomy, however, uses the Hebrew word *bashal*, which has the primary meaning of boiling. Therefore, this second passage seems to permit boiling the meat, whereas the first one strictly prohibits it.

To resolve this we use the last of Rabbi Ishmael's Thirteen Principles of Interpretation, which says, “When two Biblical passages contradict each other the contradic-

tion in question must be solved by reference to a third passage.” Therefore, we find an example of how this conflict was resolved in the days of King Josiah:

Josiah kept a Passover to the LORD in Jerusalem. And they slaughtered the Passover lamb on the fourteenth day of the first month ... Then Josiah contributed to the lay people, as Passover offerings for all who were present, lambs and young goats from the flock to the number of 30,000, and 3,000 bulls; these were from the king’s possessions. 8 And his officials contributed willingly to the people, to the priests, and to the Levites. Hilkiah, Zechariah, and Jehiel, the chief officers of the house of God, gave to the priests for the Passover offerings 2,600 Passover lambs and 300 bulls. 9 Conaniah also, and Shemaiah and Nethanel his brothers, and Hashabiah and Jeiel and Jozabad, the chiefs of the Levites, gave to the Levites for the Passover offerings 5,000 lambs and young goats and 500 bulls ... And they roasted the Passover lamb with fire according to the rule; and they boiled the holy offerings in pots, in cauldrons, and in pans (2 Chronicles 35:1, 7–9, 13)

King Josiah and the people of his day understood these passage to refer to two separate offerings. It says, “They roasted the Passover lamb with fire according to the rule; and they boiled the holy offerings in pots, in cauldrons, and in pans” (2 Chronicles 35:13). Evidently, the actual Pesach offering was roasted, and the *chagigah* (in this case, bulls) was boiled. Therefore, the Talmud says that one should remember these two offerings at the seder:

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R. Joseph says, “There have to be two kinds of meat, one in memory of the Passover-offering, the other in memory of the *chagigah* (festive-offering).” (b.Pesachim 114b)

Since we are not to bring the actual offerings since the destruction of the Holy Temple,¹ there needed to be some way to ensure that the symbolic foods were not to be confused with the korban Pesach (Passover sacrifice) that can no longer be brought. Therefore, a roasted shank bone with some meat on it was used to represent the korban Pesach (and in some more recent traditions, a chicken neck is used to further distance the similarities between the two). But the *chagigah* posed a problem. How could we represent boiled meat without it seeming like we had actually participated

1 Deuteronomy 16:5–7

in the actual event of boiling sacrificial meat? And also, how would one distinguish between the roasted meat and the boiled meat? It would be easier to represent the boiled meat with something that was commonly boiled and somewhat associated with meat such as an egg (although eggs are not considered meat according to halachah). An egg served perfectly for this purpose, because eggs are also a symbol of mourning. Why do we need a symbol of mourning on the seder plate? Because we are no longer able to enjoy the meat of the actual Passover offering, nor the sacrificial meat of its *chagigah*. We long for the day that the Holy Temple will be restored and we will be able to eat of the central components of the Passover with joy. The boiled egg on our seder plate is a constant reminder of the sacrificial meats we are no longer able to partake of.

Where did the “roasting” come in to play? The roasting of the egg probably came about as a means to ensure that the egg was easily recognized for its symbolic representation, rather than simply being an additional food item at the meal. Another possibility why the egg is both boiled and roasted is that the *chagigah* could be offered by roasting or boiling, and so the two methods are combined and visibly noticeable in this symbol. ❧

