

# THE FOURTH CUP

Unveiling the Mystery  
of the Last Supper  
and the Cross



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Foreword by Brant Pitre



IMAGE  
New York

## The Cups



I found solace in study. I found answers, too—and I turned up more questions. The scholars I consulted raised still more questions.

Among the difficulties presented by the Last Supper narratives is the way they end the seder prematurely, leaving the liturgy unfinished. Jesus and his disciples exit the room and go off into the night singing a hymn (see Mark 14:26). But they neglect to drink the cup of wine prescribed to accompany the hymn—the fourth cup. This is a glaring omission.

Indeed, Jesus draws attention to the omission and signals that it is intentional. As he takes the third cup he says: “Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God” (Mark 14:25).

The problem arises often in the works of Jewish scholars. For them, the Gospels provide a potentially

valuable early witness to the observance of Passover, so they submit them to close analysis. The missing final cup presents a serious problem.

As a pastor—even a pastor of a traditionally non-liturgical church—I knew what happened whenever I violated people’s expectations at Sunday worship. If you skip the customary hymn, there’s an outcry. Everyone notices. Many complain. In a first-century Jewish milieu, with its tightly prescribed rituals, the absence would be far more shocking—especially if a rabbi chose to stop *just short* of the climactic moment of the most essential liturgy on the most important feast of the year. Even twenty centuries later, the omission remains a scandal to readers who have lovingly observed the seder throughout their lives.

But Jesus did skip the fourth cup. He said out loud that he was doing so. He offered no explanation.

### THE GREAT OMISSION

Let’s look at the cup in context. At first glance the wine might not seem as essential to the seder as, say, the lamb or the unleavened bread. It does not appear at all in the rubrics prescribed by the Torah. Historians believe the four cups of wine were added later to heighten the banquet’s sense of festivity—“wine to gladden the heart of

man” (Psalm 104:15). Rabban Gamaliel does not number wine among the three essential elements of the Passover; but the Mishnah nonetheless carefully prescribes the dispensation of the drinks.

The Passover meal was divided into four parts, or courses, and each was accompanied by a cup of red wine mixed with water. The poorest Jews were guaranteed four cups at the community’s expense, so that their experience of the festival should be complete. The rabbis’ instructions governed even the proportion of wine to water in each cup.

As we’ve seen, the meal’s first course consisted of a special blessing (*kiddush*) spoken over the first cup of wine, followed by the serving of a dish of herbs.

The second course included a recital of the Passover narrative, the questions and answers, and the “Little Hallel” (Psalm 113), followed by the drinking of the second cup of wine.

The third course was the main meal, consisting of lamb and unleavened bread, after which was drunk the third cup of wine, known as the “cup of blessing.”

The culmination of the seder was the singing of the “Great Hallel” (Psalms 114–118) and the drinking of the fourth cup of wine, often called the “cup of consummation.”

Historians of the Passover see this pattern reflected in the Gospel narratives of the Last Supper. The twen-

tieth century’s most respected scholar of ancient Jewish law, Rabbi David Daube of Oxford, considered the Gospel sequence in a study titled (spoiler alert) “The Omission of the Fourth Cup.” He notes that the cup Jesus pronounced to be the “blood of the covenant” (Mark 14:24) is clearly the third cup of the haggadah, which was known as the “blessing cup” because it was consumed with the prayer of thanksgiving at the main course. Saint Paul seems to confirm this cup as the third in his own discussion of the Lord’s Supper: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 10:16).

With the prayer over that cup, Jesus tells his disciples he will “not drink again of the fruit of the vine until . . . I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” David Daube observes: “The meaning is that the fourth cup will not be taken, as would be the normal thing, at a subsequent stage of the service; it will be postponed till the kingdom is fully established.”<sup>1</sup>

In its immediate context, the fourth cup loomed large. It brought closure to the rites that renewed Israel’s covenant with God. Its omission would be like a blank spot on a wall in the Louvre—in the place of the *Mona Lisa*. After moving in line for hours, people expect to arrive at their promised (and, in this case, accustomed) destination. The omission of the fourth cup—the “cup of consummation”—would have been jarring. It would,

indeed, change the disciples' sense of all that had gone before.<sup>2</sup>

### CUPS AND DOWNS

In the Scriptures, a cup of wine is rarely (if ever) simply a cup of wine. The "cup" is one of the most significant and suggestive objects in Hebrew literature. Its symbolic value is complex. It represents the future. It represents judgment. It represents blessing. It represents wrath. It represents joy. It represents sorrow. And it can signify all of these things at the same time.

Every cup of wine is consequential, determinative of life to come. It is the mark of righteousness, then, to choose the Lord as one's "cup." The Psalmist proclaims: "The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot" (Psalm 16:5). And elsewhere, similarly: "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD" (Psalm 116:13). The cup is a characteristic element in Israel's worship. It signifies an acceptance, in advance, of God's providential care.

The future remains, however, a matter of uncertainty and anxiety. The constant message of the Bible is that we should entrust everything to the Lord. But people have always been tempted to hedge their bets. The Prophet Isaiah railed against his contemporaries who forgot the

God of Israel and rather sought their future with idols, filling "cups of mixed wine for Destiny" (Isaiah 65:11). In doing so, they broke their covenant with the true God and established a bond instead with Fortune and Destiny, the at best illusory (or at worst demonic) idols of their pagan neighbors.

The cup is, in either case, a sign of a shared life. It signifies a covenant bond, a family bond. The prophets speak of God's relationship with Israel in such terms, comparing it to a marriage (see, for example, Hosea 2:18–20; Jeremiah 2:2, 3:1). Acts of idolatry were also considered in such terms, but rather as adulterous unions. The word used to describe the false gods, *ba'al*, derives from a common Semitic word for husband (Hosea 2:16–17). To worship falsely was to enter into an illicit relationship. To fill a cup with wine for an idol was symbolic of the treachery—giving to a false god what belonged to the true.

What people found fearful about true worship was often their own unworthiness. Every covenant, as I've pointed out, promises either blessings or curses—blessings upon faithful fulfillment, curses upon infidelity. Everyone who enters the covenant drinks from the same cup, but the meaning of the cup depends on their faithfulness. They drink it either to salvation or to condemnation.

Thus we find the covenantal cup called "the cup of

salvation,” as just described, but also the “cup of his wrath” (see Isaiah 51:17). The cup of blessing overflows to the righteous (Psalm 23:5). The cup of wrath overflows to the wicked:

*Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink  
of the cup of his wrath, and makes them drunk,  
to gaze on their shame!  
You will be sated with contempt instead of glory.  
Drink, yourself, and stagger!  
The cup in the LORD's right hand  
will come around to you,  
and shame will come upon your glory!*

(Habbakuk 2:15–16)

This sense of “the cup” is not peculiar to the Old Testament. Saint Paul uses similar terms to discuss the chalice of the Lord’s Supper—the third cup, the blessing cup, which Jesus consecrated. He tells the Corinthians:

*The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? . . . You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. (1 Corinthians 10:16, 21)*

Yet, again, even for Christians, the “cup of blessing” can also be a cup of severe judgment and wrath. To those who approach unworthily it merits not the blessing of the covenant but the curse. Thus, Paul warns the same congregation:

*Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. (1 Corinthians 11:28–30)*

In the New Testament, God’s covenant is still signified by the cup—and the terms remain the same. “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse” (Deuteronomy 30:19). The cup represents the future: blessed or cursed.

## CROSS PURPOSES

A cup in any Jewish liturgy was an item of consequence. A cup in the seder was supremely important. What then are we to make of Jesus’ omission of the final cup of his last Passover?

Some scholars speculate that psychological factors

account for Jesus' forgetfulness. They point out how, subsequently, he "began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death'" (Mark 14:33-34). Perhaps he was too upset to be bothered with liturgical precision in following the rubrics.

While that analysis may seem plausible, further reflection renders it unlikely. For one thing, if he was so distracted and confused, it seems doubtful Jesus would forget and interrupt the Passover liturgy *after expressly declaring his intention not to drink the fourth cup*, especially since he went ahead and sang the Great Hallel. Why would he declare himself so plainly before acting in so disorderly a fashion? His other actions that night indicate a man admittedly distressed, but in full possession of himself. Why then did he choose not to drink?

I looked to the next point on the Gospel time line, and that was Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. There I found what I was looking for. I found at least a reference to the missing cup. "And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, 'My Father, if it be possible, *let this cup pass from me*; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt'" (Matthew 26:39).

*This cup!* Three times Jesus prayed for his Father to take away "this cup." An obvious question arises: *What cup was Jesus talking about?*

Some scholars explain Jesus' language by identifying

it with "the cup of God's wrath" in the Old Testament prophets (Isaiah 51:17; Jeremiah 25:15). Surely there is a connection here, but the connection seems less direct than does the primary link suggested by the Passover setting.

Note how Jesus' resolution not to drink "the fruit of the vine" seems to reappear in the scene at Golgotha right before he is crucified: "And they offered him wine mingled with myrrh; but he did not take it" (Mark 15:23). The narrative does not explain his refusal, but it probably points back to Jesus' pledge not to drink until his kingdom is manifested in glory.

Then the plot takes an interesting turn. "After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), 'I thirst'" (John 19:28).

Jesus was thirsty long before this closing moment of his life. His words, therefore, must reflect more than a desire for a last bit of fluid. He seems to have been in full possession of himself as he realized that "all was now finished."

Whatever it is that was now finished seems to be directly connected to his utterance, which he spoke "to fulfill the Scripture." More things fall into place upon reading what followed his expression of thirst: "A bowl full of vinegar stood there; so they put a sponge full of the vinegar on hyssop and held it to his mouth" (19:29). Only John noticed that hyssop, the branch prescribed

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in the Passover law for sprinkling the blood of the lamb, was used (Exodus 12:22).

This verse reveals something very significant. Jesus had left unfinished the Passover liturgy when he chose to omit the fourth cup. He had stated his intention not to drink wine again until he came into the glory of his kingdom. Then he *refused* wine offered to him on one occasion, right before being nailed to the cross (Mark 15:23). Finally, at the very end, Jesus was offered “sour wine” or “vinegar” (John 19:30; Matthew 27:48; Mark 15:36; Luke 23:36). All the Synoptics testify to this. But only John tells us how he responded: “When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, ‘It is finished’; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (19:30).

*It is finished!* At last I had an answer to the preacher’s question. It was the Passover that was now finished!

Nothing, it seems, was missing from his seder. All was consummated, completed, brought to conclusion with the wine the Lord consumed with his final breath.

CHAPTER 10

## The Hour

I returned often in those days to the Gospel According to John—that most Paschal of the Gospels. When a group of students invited me to speak at Grove City College, I knew what topic I wanted to address.

I was now reading all the pages of John’s Gospel in light of the last pages—the consummation of Jesus’ life on the cross. As I’ve already mentioned, the Passover is profoundly important in the fourth Gospel. The narrative is structured around three celebrations of the feast. Jesus is identified repeatedly in the first chapter as the “Lamb of God.”

Yet John remains unique among the Gospels because he does not explicitly present the Last Supper as a Passover seder. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus expresses his passionate desire to eat this Passover with his disciples. In Matthew and Mark he repeatedly speaks of the meal