Pascha as Liberation

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In Orthodox Christian tradition, the feast we are discussing today is called Pascha, which is simply the Greek form of Pesach.

When Orthodox Christians call the feast by this name, we are keeping it tethered, deliberately and insistently, to a specific story: the story of Israel's deliverance from Egypt. The story of a people enslaved, a tyrant confronted, a sea crossed, a liberation enacted by a God who, the Scriptures insist, takes sides.

Passover stories are not vague or generic. They are about something particular: an oppression named, a power defied, a people brought through to the other side. Pascha insists we keep that particularity.

Narrative event

In Orthodox tradition, Pascha is an enacted narrative event, an embodied communal procession from darkness into light.

The model for this, which Orthodox Christianity largely inherits without always naming explicitly, is the ongoing Jewish celebration of Passover. In every generation, each person is obliged to see themselves as if they personally left Egypt. Not as if their ancestors did, or as a historical memory held at a distance. But personally, in their own bodies, now.

That is the logic Pascha carries forward. The feast is not saying: remember what God once did, long ago, for other people. It is saying: know yourself as someone this story is still about. Know yourself as someone who has been — and perhaps still is — in Egypt. And know yourself as someone for whom the God of the Exodus is still at work.

Bible's master narrative

The weight of this Paschal narrative is the central place the Exodus story holds in the scriptural canon as a whole. It is the lens through which, just as Israel does, Orthodox Christians read everything else.

The Torah is shaped around it. Even the creation narrative that opens the Scriptures anticipates it: the God who divides the waters and raises up dry land is already, on the first page, the God who will part the sea and bring his people through. The prophets return to the Exodus constantly. Isaiah speaks of a new Exodus; Jeremiah promises a new covenant that will surpass even the Sinai covenant; Hosea calls Israel back through the wilderness as through a courtship. The Psalms are the songbook of a people who have been delivered, and who are, often, still suffering, still waiting, still crying out to the God who once heard them.

What this means is that the Scriptures as a whole are the literature of a people who have been oppressed, and who believe with everything they have, that their God acts in history on behalf of the marginalised. That is not a modern political reading imposed on ancient texts. It is what the texts have always said, from the inside.

Communities who have needed this to be true have always known how to read it. Liberation theology among the poor of Latin America, the Black church in the American South, the churches under apartheid: none of these were misreading the Bible. They were reading it *with* the grain, because the text was written, from the beginning, for people in their situation.

But what happens when a community forgets it is reading the literature of the oppressed, and begins to read it as the literature of the powerful?

Christ crucified as Israel

There is a reading of the crucifixion that has been, for much of Christian history, the dominant popular one. On this reading, Israel handed Jesus over; the Jewish people bear a collective guilt for his death; and the Church supersedes Israel as the bearer of God's promise. Easter, on this account, is the moment when the old story ends and the new one begins. Passover is superseded. Israel is replaced.

This reading is not only theologically mistaken. It has been catastrophically, lethally dangerous. Some of the worst violence against Jewish communities in European history was carried out during Holy Week, inflamed by exactly this misreading, sometimes from the steps of churches.

But Jesus was crucified *as* Israel, not *by* Israel. The cross is not the moment at which the story of Jesus and the story of Israel diverge. It is the moment of their deepest convergence.

Israel's story, as told in the Scriptures, is largely the story of suffering under empire: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, the Seleucids, and then Rome. When Jesus is handed over to Roman authority and executed by a Roman method of punishment, he enters into and recapitulates that long history of imperial violence against God's covenant people. The cross is the culmination of Pharaoh's oppression, of Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of the Temple, of Antiochus's desecration of the holy place. Read this way, the Passion is not a rupture between Jesus and his people but the deepest possible identification with them.

This is the reading most consistent with the Suffering Servant tradition in Isaiah, which the earliest Christians drew upon to interpret the crucifixion — a tradition that is collective and representative in its original context, and which loses its depth when reduced to a transaction between God and an isolated individual. Jesus on the cross is Israel under Rome, and his vindication in the resurrection is the vindication of the God of Israel over the powers of this world.

When preachers or hymns present the Passion as a story of what "the Jews" did to Jesus, they invert this entirely. They transform a narrative of imperial oppression into a narrative of Jewish guilt, and in so doing they obscure the very thing the cross is meant to reveal. This inversion became possible precisely when Christians had reconstructed themselves as Romans — as the dominant partner of empire rather than as a movement of those on the underside of power. A religion whose founder was executed by the state is politically intolerable for a state church. The guilt for the crucifixion had to be relocated, and it was relocated onto the Jewish people.

That relocation has consequences that reach to the present day. Recognising it is the precondition for reading the Passion honestly — and for understanding what Pascha is actually celebrating.

The enemies named

One of the things the scriptural tradition does with great consistency and considerable courage is name its enemies. It names specific powers and shows how they operate.

Pharaoh is the prototype. But the Scriptures are careful to show that Pharaoh is a type, a recurring

figure in the drama of history. He appears as the Assyrian, as Babylon, as Caesar, as Herod, as the colonial governor. He appears also in a long line of unrighteous rulers in Israel itself that the prophets call out. The names and the empires change. The logic does not: power concentrated beyond accountability, people enslaved or expendable, resistance criminalised, the vulnerable told their suffering is the natural order of things.

The dominant way the Eastern Orthodox tradition has understood what Christ accomplishes in the Passion and Resurrection is captured in the phrase Christus Victor — the Messiah as the one who defies and conquers evil. Not primarily a sacrifice offered to satisfy a debt, but a confrontation with the powers of darkness, oppression, and death, and a victory over them from within.

Orthodox theology extends this all the way to a cosmic register. Christ descends into Sheol, into Hades — into the realm of death itself, the ultimate power that holds all humanity captive — and liberates it from within. The icon of the Resurrection in the Orthodox tradition does not depict a figure floating peacefully upward from a tomb. It shows Christ standing over the shattered gates of hell, grasping Adam and Eve by the wrist and hauling them up from the pit, the imprisoned departed of Israel rising around him. It is Exodus imagery at full stretch. It is the same strong arm, the same outstretched hand, working at the deepest possible level of bondage.

Story not over

The global turn towards authoritarianism that we are living through today is the same ancient structure the Scriptures have been naming for three thousand years: power concentrated in the hands of strongmen who demand loyalty, who scapegoat minorities, who crush dissent, and who frequently wrap themselves in religious symbolism while doing so. The strongman who poses with a Bible. The nationalist movement that claims to be defending Christian civilisation while enacting policies of exclusion and brutality. This is Pharaoh dressed in Moses's robes, and Pascha, read honestly, is a direct confrontation with exactly this.

Christian communities are not facing this as observers. Across the Middle East, across sub-Saharan Africa, in parts of Asia, Christian communities face active persecution, displacement, and martyrdom. For many people alive today, Pascha is not a theological reflection on liberation. It is celebrated under threat, in the shadow of real violence, by communities who know from current experience what it means to be the people Pharaoh wants gone.

And alongside them — sharing the same vulnerability, targeted by many of the same forces and the same ideological currents — Jewish communities face a level of antisemitism that has not been seen in decades, rising across the political spectrum.

The communities rooted in this story — Jewish and Christian — are being targeted by the same logic that the story has always named as the adversary of God's people. The shared vulnerability is itself a sign pointing back to a shared story.

And in that shared story, the God of the Exodus does not remain neutral. The God of the Exodus moves. That is, perhaps, the most scandalous claim the feast makes: that the God we are speaking of is not equidistant between Pharaoh and the enslaved. God crosses to one side of that line. Pascha is the annual, communal, embodied insistence that this is still true.

How we celebrate and live Pascha

Pascha cannot be a private, spiritual, or merely religious event. To celebrate it honestly is already a political act, in the deepest sense of that word: it is a declaration about who holds power and who does not, about whose story is true, about which version of events the community stakes its life on.

The community formed by this feast is called to carry its memory into the world — to stand, as the God of the Exodus stands, with the oppressed and against the powers. Including, and perhaps especially, when the powers wear a cross. The worst betrayals of this tradition have not come from its declared enemies. They have come from within, when the Church has made its peace with Pharaoh and called it Christian civilisation.

Pascha holds three tenses together, and all three matter. It is a past event: something happened, in history, in an occupied country, outside a city wall, in a garden, in a tomb. History was changed.

It is also a present reality: Christ is risen now, the powers have already been confronted and found wanting, the last word does not belong to any Pharaoh or Caesar currently in office.

And it is an eschatological hope: the liberation is not yet complete. We are still crossing. Many are still in the wilderness. Morning is still coming.

In the Passover Haggadah it is proclaimed:

Our history moves from slavery to freedom.
Our narration begins with degradation and rises to dignity.
Our service opens with the rule of evil and advances
toward the kingdom of God.

In the Paschal services of the Orthodox Church we sing songs of victory about those same moves – slavery to freedom, degradation to dignity, death to life, and earth to heaven. These are oriented to the kingdom of God, to what is invoked as the “Pascha of the age to come.”

And these songs begin to be sung on the night of Pascha in complete darkness, before the dawn comes. This is not a celebration of a world already set right. It is the community’s declaration, made in the dark and against the available evidence, that no empire, no strongman, no prince of this age gets the final word.

We sing it for one another. We sing it for all those — Jewish, Christian, and everyone else caught in the grip of the same ancient logic — who are still waiting for morning. And we sing it as a promise, and a commitment, that we will not mistake the darkness for the truth.

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