

Foot Washing and the Priesthood

By Greg Witherow

The Last Supper was a celebration of the Passover. It was a paschal feast instituted by Moses to celebrate the Israelite exodus from Egypt. On the night of Passover the Israelites were commanded to kill a lamb, spread the lamb's blood on their doorposts and eat the lamb. By doing so the angel of death "passed over" the house. Otherwise the angel killed all the first-born males in the home. Needless to say the Egyptians did not keep the Passover. As a result of the Egyptian first-born deaths Pharaoh demanded the Israelites leave. The events of the Passover serve as the high point of Jewish history.

New Testament Christianity builds on Old Testament Judaism. Christ transformed the paschal Rite into the Mass. At the Last Supper Christ gave us the Eucharist and the priesthood. He gave us the Eucharist when he said, "this is my body" and "this is my blood poured out for you". He gave us the priesthood when he said, "do this". A footnote in the Ignatius Catholic Study Bible says,

"According to the Council of Trent in 1562, Jesus' words 'do this in memory of me' are linked with the apostles' ordination to the New Covenant priesthood (Sess. 22, chap. 1)."¹

Additionally as part of the Last Supper Christ washed the disciples' feet. Why? Christ said it was to demonstrate humility and to instruct the disciples to behave likewise. But as is often the case with scripture, there are multiple layers. It seems apparent the foot washing was part of the apostles' ordination. If so this builds on Old Testament imagery. The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible comments,

"The foot washing may be a sign of priestly ordination as in the OT (Ex. 40:12, 30-32). Against this background, Jesus washing Peter and the disciples parallels the scene of Moses washing Aaron and his sons on the day of their consecration to the priesthood (Lev. 8:6)."²

Christ is depicted in the New Testament as the new and greater Moses. Moses consecrated Aaron and his sons by washing their hands and feet. If filmed, Moses washing would have looked similar to Christ washing at the Last Supper, with both men on their knees with a bowl of water and towel.

Likewise the dialogue between Peter and Christ can be explained in a priestly context. Peter at first protests the washing, and then asks for the washing of his head and his hands. Christ seems to indicate Peter had been baptized ("he who is bathed does not need to wash") and therefore Peter is (spiritually) clean³. Yet Christ tells Peter he will have no "part" of Jesus if he doesn't get his feet washed. Again, the Ignatius Study Bible gives us an insight.

"The apostles receiving a "part" (Greek, meros) in Jesus (Jn 13:8) recalls how the Levites had their portion (Greek, meris) in the Lord alone (Num 18:20 and Deut 10:9 in the LXX)."⁴

The Levites did not inherit land in Israel. Uniquely their inheritance ("part" in Greek) was the Lord. This applies to all of us. But given the Levitical imagery used at the Last Supper, the foot washing and the "part" can be understood within the context of priesthood. Christ was initiating priests.

¹ *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible New Testament* Second Catholic Edition RSV (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2010), 149.

² *Ibid*, 187.

³ *Ibid*, 187.

⁴ *Ibid*, 187.