

OpenTheo

'The Lost Supper' with Matthew Colvin

November 30, 2020



Alastair Roberts

Matthew Colvin joins me to discuss his recent book, 'The Lost Supper' (<https://amzn.to/33s5Th0>). Within a wide-ranging conversation we discuss the value of rabbinic and other extra-biblical Jewish sources for our reading of the New Testament, the meaning of Christ's words of institution, rethinking the metaphysics and the mechanics of the Supper, Eucharistic practices, and much else besides!

Transcript

Hello and welcome. Today I am joined by my friend Matthew Colvin, who is a priest in the Reformed Episcopal Church and the author of this recent book, *The Lost Supper*, which is an absolutely stunning discussion of the Eucharist and the exploration of it from the perspective of Jewish and rabbinic sources, and I think you'll find it very helpful. So, to start off our discussion, why *The Lost Supper*? It's a very provocative title.

Have we actually lost the Supper? Yeah, I want to thank my friend Tim Gallant who suggested that title for me, and first let me thank you for having me on, and thank you for reading my book and responding to it. *The Lost Supper*, as a title, was chosen because as a child growing up in Lutheranism and then Reformed Christianity, I remember sort of wondering what am I supposed to be doing as I'm partaking of the Lord's Supper? What sorts of thoughts am I supposed to be thinking? What sorts of actions are appropriate or inappropriate? And then in graduate school, I was at Cornell for Greek and Latin, studying ancient philosophy, and then I was a little bit undone in my fifth year at Cornell because I discovered the work of David Dahlberg, and that was also the discovered N.T. Wright. And so I became fascinated with New Testament studies at that point, which was too bad because I had a dissertation to write that wasn't about New Testament studies.

And around the same time, I had recently been married to a Jewish woman, and she introduced me to Passover. And I was always sitting at this Jewish Passover, listening to Hebrew prayers being recited. My Greek grad student mind heard a word, *afikomen*, and boggled a little bit because it sounded very, very Greek.

I said, maybe that's a second heiress of afikneomai. That's not a Hebrew word. Oh, it must be a Hebrew word.

And so that caused me to do some research on David Dahlberg, and discovered that that word has been controversial ever since, and that the best explanation for it is the coming one. So that even in unbelieving Jewish Passover statements, non-Christian Passover celebrations, there's still this word that nobody's quite sure what it means. And that myth is a puzzle.

And I love puzzles, I love etymology, and I needed to dive in and figure out what it meant. And that led me into research into what was the original context of Jesus' last supper? Why is it that his words, this is my body, have been so controversial? Joachim Jaramius' Eucharistic words of Jesus is sort of still the magnum opus, the standard work on what do we think Jesus meant at the last supper. And he admits, nobody's quite sure what these words mean.

And that, long story short, the case I make in the book is that by saying this is my body, Jesus is identifying himself with an already known piece of unleavened bread, that every Jew sitting around that table would have identified with Israel's Messiah, and would have understood, we're eating this bread in anticipation of the coming Messiah. And for Jesus then to pick it up and say this is my body, he's identified himself with Israel's Messiah. And then secondarily, the question of the cup, that looking at what did you say the cups of the Passover meant, we find that the third cup that Jesus used to institute the supper was associated with the kingdom of God.

And that's the cup that he drinks with his disciples, and then vows that he's not going to drink it again until he drinks it new with them in the kingdom. And then goes out, gets crucified, and refuses the vinegar of sour wine that's offered to him while he's on the cross. And I think a very poignant and meaningful living out of a vow that he had taken in connection with Passover and the means of these cups.

So, that's what's meant by the title. What's the Jewish background of the Last Supper? And how can it inform our celebration of the Eucharist, and maybe connect the historical Jesus and his vivid first century Jewish environment to what we're doing every week when we celebrate the Eucharist. So, you've already mentioned a few authors, and your work is in part a retrieval and representation of a thesis that goes back a few decades now.

Could you maybe give a brief outline of some of your principal interlocutors? Who are the people that you found most helpful in developing your thesis, and what do they add in particular to the conversation? Well, it's almost 100 years old now. The progenitor of the thesis is Robert Eisler, who was a Swiss Jewish, later Christian convert, and a difficult man. He is something of an outsider to New Testament studies, as also was David Dauber.

Dauber was a refugee from Hitler's Germany, and an expert in history of law, especially Roman law. But he was also trained in rabbinic scholarship in a way that a lot of New Testament scholars of his day just weren't. And so, those are the first two, Eisler and Dauber.

And then I would also add Joachim Jeremias, one of the greatest German New Testament scholars of the 20th century. And then I also have delved into some more modern scholarship. Roman Catholic scholar Brent Petry has authored some books on the Passover and the Eucharist.

One of the difficulties about this topic is that it really occupies the intersection of some very often opposed fields of study. So New Testament studies, but also Christian origins and history of liturgy, philosophical sacramentology, and then also history of the Passover, a field dominated by Jewish scholars, not Christian scholars. And then on top of that, you've got Christian scholars who are committed to their own church traditions and the traditional sacramentologies, whether they be Roman Catholic, Lutheran or Reformed.

And so it's a topic that it's difficult to approach without *parti pri*, without bias. My training is in pre-Socratic philosophy. I specialize in reading enigmatic texts that don't have any surrounding context, that have been ripped from their original sources and quoted by someone else, and try to reconstruct what they mean.

And that means I have maybe more than other people, a little more sensitive radar to the nuances of Greek syntax, word order, overtones of denotation and connotation. And so I think that's served me well, but also coming from outside the guild. I think that's not a coincidence that Iser came from outside the guild, Darwai came from outside the guild, and I'm also outside the guild.

Because you know how scholarship gets, incestuous footnotes and tribalism and following in the footsteps of your doctor father. It can be helpful, and I hope it will be helpful for everyone who reads the book, to have a perspective from outside the guild. One of the things I found on that point, reading the book, is on the surface it's about the supper, and it has a lot to say that's really illuminating on the subject.

But in some ways that's illustrative of a deeper claim that you're making about methodology, and the way that certain sources should feature within New Testament scholarship. Could you say a bit more about your use of rabbinic sources, how you justify using sources that many would claim are anachronistic when applied to New Testament texts. Why are these texts illuminating, and why should Christians be paying attention? Well, this is really asking why study rabbinic material, why look at rabbinic material that's from 250 or 550 AD, the Mishnah, the Seftor, third century, and then the Talmud's even later than that, fifth century, sixth century.

Well, I like to answer this question by sort of turning it back on the asker usually. I said, do you use Greek lexicons? And well, they're full of extra biblical information about how Strabo and Plato and Homer use words. Often, there will be words in the New Testament that we don't have a lot of precedent for in earlier Greek literature, and were cast upon later Greek literature.

And the word daily, it's not actually daily, but *epuseon*, in the Lord's prayer, give us this day our *epuseon* bread, that doesn't occur, as Origen notes, in earlier Greek literature. So, if we're going to know what it means, we're going to need to look at later, and we might even have to look at other languages. And that's what Origen suggests, that this word is coined by the New Testament authors to render something that is in Aramaic or Hebrew, and doesn't occur in Greek.

So, I find, if we do not take seriously the historicity of the Bible, that it was written by first century Jews, about the actions of first century Jews, living in the Greco Roman world of ancient Palestine. If we don't take that seriously, then we're going to create a dichotomy between, classically, the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. There really should be no such divide.

If these things didn't happen in history under a Roman procurator, then they didn't happen at all. And if they did happen in history, then we should be able to study them by looking at what Jews thought. Now, there's a secondary issue, and that's chronology.

The fact that a lot of these rabbinic sources are later, almost all of them are later than the New Testament, even Josephus, who gives us a wealth of first century Jewish information, is a good 30, 40 years later than our Gospels and the events of Jesus. And I would add, there's, I think in some instances, a reluctance on the part of Jews to see Jewish sources' mind as resources for illuminating the New Testament, and then it's just sort of discarded. Oh, we've got our little nugget of something that is parallel to the Gospels.

And we don't need to think about the Talmud or think about Jewish law in its integrity, which is to use it for the glimmers of light that we can derive from it. I wanted to share with you a quotation about this. This is from Duncan Durrett, who's another legal scholar coming at the New Testament from history of law perspective.

And he's talking about the great source book that every New Testament scholar uses, and every New Testament scholar is a little bit embarrassed about using. I'm talking about Strach Bebergbeck's *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash*, which is a running commentary on the Holy Testament, citing all the passages of the Mishnah and the Talmud and other Jewish rabbinic sources that offer parallels and illumination. And Durrett says, when one of these authors puts down Mishnah Sanhedrin 10.3, or Babylonian Talmud Baba Batra 15b, he's using shorthand.

He means that if we consult those passages, we will find something to our advantage. He does not certify that the passages are true, or that the passages can be traced to the first century. He does not suggest that Jesus necessarily relied on a tradition, which is reflected in those passages.

But when we see the point in each case, we realize that knowledge kept alive in some form, both in the gospel and in rabbinic passages, makes it easier to understand what Jesus is talking about. In short, and he's criticizing Jacob Neusner, whereas Neusner's warnings and ridicule of the uncautious should rightly deter us from blithely using rabbis to enrich our picture of Jesus, Jewish culture with its conservative bias, meaning they're going to keep their traditions going, is a fine illuminator of dark places in the value of parallels depends on, and here's the criteria, plausibility, rationality, and in short, success. First we scrutinize scripture and then traditions, which though they may be far from complete and far from representative, may over centuries retain something filling in our woeful gaps in background knowledge.

So that's the excuse for using rabbinic sources. They're conservative, they preserve things. And we also need to remember when we come to the Talmud, we're not just coming to a work from 550 AD or 650 AD and say, well, that looks a lot later than the New Testament, you better not use it.

You're actually dealing with 700 years of strata. It's like, I like to say, it's like Schliemann excavating Troy. He didn't just find one city, he found nine cities stacked on top of each other.

And so we've got citations in the Talmud from Hillel and Shammai from the first century BC and earlier than Jesus. We have things from the era of Eliezer of Menachem and Gamaliel, contemporary with Jesus and with Paul. And then of course we have things later from the period of Amorim, the period of the Talmud and period of Mishnah.

So that's why it's usable. And to my mind, the test is, do we have success? Is it illuminating? Does it have the ring of truth when we suggest that here's a Jewish thing that might be going on? And if it doesn't, leave it to one side. That's one of the things I've always appreciated about Dorbet when he brings forward a particular interpretation and a naughty problem suddenly resolves itself.

And at that point you realize, well, there's something, as you say, the ring of truth to that. But also it proves its worth just in its explanatory power. Even if this thing is not something that you could derive from the biblical text itself, it gives us something that opens up the biblical text in ways that other things clearly are not.

I think the question that many people would have at this point, a concern, would be what does this do with, I mean, if we're depending upon extra biblical material and literature, what does that do with biblical sufficiency? I want to touch on the sufficiency question,

but let me back up and add one more point about how I came to the necessity of using Jewish background, of reading the New Testament Jewishly. And that's something that I came to after years of study of pagan classical Greek. And when you're steeped in Plato and Homer and Euripides, and then you turn to the New Testament, it's really quite striking how little illumination there is from pagan Greek sources.

You become quickly aware that this is all transpiring. Jesus' ministry, his activities of his apostles, the ministry of Paul, it's all happening in a deeply Jewish world that's charged with Jewish stories and Jewish traditions and weird Jewish things like stone water pots and hand washing and Passover sacrifices. And if we want to understand that world, yes, the main thing we need to go to is the Old Testament.

We need to be familiar with the Hebrew Bible. But beyond the Hebrew Bible, we need to attend to intertestamental literature, of which there's not a lot. And then if we're going to fill out our picture of Judaism more fully, we're going to need some extra biblical sources.

And so that raises the question of, is it sufficient? Is the Bible adequate to lead us to salvation, to tell us what we need to know about Jesus? And I'll say two things about this. One, for the most part, the sorts of illuminating details that we derive from rabbinic sources are things that lend vividness and color, that make things come a little bit more alive, that disclose to us little nuances that we might not have been aware of. So for instance, when we become aware that the rabbis, especially the Pharisees, had passed a decree that the daughters of the Samaritans are unclean with the uncleanness of menstruation perpetually.

And when we further realize that uncleanness is especially transmitted by vessels, then we come to John chapter 4, and we read the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. And we hear her saying to him, sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. And she leaves a picture for him.

Then we realize that John's word, Jews do not sumquontai with Samaritans, that it would be a real mistake and would miss a great deal of vividness for us to translate it as some English translations do. Jews do not have dealings with Samaritans. They just don't get along.

They shun each other. But that's not what that verb means. It's etymologically in Greek, it's they don't use things together with, they don't use vessels together with Samaritans, because of this concern about uncleanness.

Well, that's a detail. Is it going to change whether you're saved? Are you not going to know Jesus? If you don't have that detail? Well, no. But it sure makes the story come alive a little more.

So that's the first thing is, we're not dealing with satirologically essential truths here. But

then secondly, I have a concern that if we don't treat the Gospels in the New Testament, as things that happen in history, we end up worshipping a Jesus whose feet don't seemingly touch the ground, that he becomes a sort of docetic phantom, walking around five feet off the ground, not behaving as a Jew, not engaged with... I mean, for instance, Jesus went up for the Feast of Dedication. What's that? Yeah, that's Hanukkah.

That's an extra biblical feast. It's instituted to commemorate the victory of the Maccabees and the rededication of the temple after the war with the Greco-Syrian Empire, which happened after the end of the Old Testament, before the beginning of the New. Well, if Jesus didn't have a problem celebrating that feast, we're going to need extra biblical sources, not least, I would say, the Apocrypha would count as quasi-extra biblical sources.

We're going to need to read non-canonical books in order to understand what's going on. So that would be my answer to the question. Just to give people a sense of the lay of the land, what are some of the extra biblical sources that we're dealing with? People might be familiar with the Apocrypha that you've mentioned.

You've been talking about rabbinic sources. Can you maybe just give a sense of what are some of the different sources that we might draw upon? Yeah. So the main place we need to go is the Mishnah from around 215-250 AD.

There's a tractate of the Mishnah, Pesachim, which deals with regulations for the Passover. And then secondarily, the commentary on the Mishnah, the Babylonian and the Jerusalemite Talmud from 650 and 550, respectively, offer further commentary on what Jews did at the Passover. So those are the main sources.

I also, here and there, I'll dip into other things. So there's a discussion, for instance, of Bruce Malina's Palestinian Targum. It's called the Manna Tradition in the Palestinian Targum.

So what did Jews think about Manna? That it was sort of still kept in heaven, still existent after the Exodus. And so he tries to make application of that. So that's Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible circulating and being used, especially in the diaspora in the first century, but also later.

So those are the main sources we'd be dealing with, the Targums and the Mishnah and the Talmud. So let's say we get to the Gospel of Luke and we open up the passage about the Last Supper. How do we go about just beginning to interpret a text like that? How do we maybe take certain clues from the text and work from those? Is this a more deductive approach? How would you distinguish between some of the approaches that have been taken to the text and the sort of approach that you're advocating and exemplify? Well, there have been a number of attempts to do this.

To run through the narrative, both the Gospels and then also 1 Corinthians 11, you know, other main New Testament account of Jesus's activity in the upper room. And I really like Joachim Jeremias' treatment in his Eucharistic Words of Jesus. He gives a list 14 things that are distinctive of it being a Passover occasion.

And I hate to say it, but it's actually somewhat controversial to just come out and claim the Last Supper was a Passover. Because if you don't grant that, then everything I'm doing with rabbinic sources is odious and irrelevant. If it's not a Passover meal, then none of these Passover customs apply.

And none of the Passover semiotics, what this bread represents, what this cup represents, what we're doing, why we're singing a hymn, why we're going out afterwards, why we're in a rented None of it makes sense. But I do think it is a Passover. And I think Jeremias' 14 reasons are pretty powerful.

I'm not going to list them for you here, but it's things like the fact that they're in Jerusalem or that the room was vented or that they're drinking red wine, that they're reclining, and Jesus is saying words of interpretation over the elements of the food at the meal. And I think there have been attempts to criticize Jeremias' account. All of these things, by the way, are substantiated with rabbinic sources.

Jeremias says, oh, okay, well, there are regulations about the boundaries of Jerusalem being artificially extended to include the town of Bethany nearby, because it's difficult. You've got to eat the Passover in Jerusalem. But when 2 million Jews have fled into a city, we need to expand the boundaries and offer more accommodations, more borrowed houses.

So, for each of these 14 details that Jeremias finds, he induces rabbinic sources showing that there were regulations about these things. And it's possible for people, and people have tried to critique individually each of the 14 things. But that's fundamentally to miss the force of the argument.

It's an argument of cumulative weight. No other explanation is going to account for all these 14 things. There are just too many details.

It's one of the things I notice a lot in certain sorts of scholarship that's designed to avoid certain readings rather than actually put forward something that's convincing. You end up just attacking all these different discrete arguments without actually thinking, we're talking about the picture of best fit here. And this picture takes into account all these different details.

Some, it gives more weight to than others. Some, it may be more convincing on than others. But over the whole, it makes so much more sense than any of the other pictures that are presented.

Yeah. I just want to mention one particular objection that I find sort of emblematic of this sort of pigheaded approach to resisting the idea that the Last Supper was Passover meal. And that is the alleged discrepancy in chronology between John's gospel and the synoptics, which hinges on this one little word that John uses, that when Jesus was arrested and crucified, it was the pereskalatze to pascha, the preparation of the Passover.

Well, scholars have mistakenly taken that word pereskalatze and they've looked at pereskalatze to sabbatu, the preparation day of the Sabbath. And so, okay, that means the day before the Sabbath. Therefore, preparation of the Passover should mean the day before Passover, and that means John's gospel tells us that Jesus was crucified on the day before Passover, which means that the Last Supper, which he ate the previous night, cannot have been the Passover meal since the Passover is yet to come on that chronology.

But unfortunately, that's a mistake of philology. Pereskalatze, as Theodore Zahn had pointed out in the 1910s, doesn't mean the day before any old day. It means the preparation for the Sabbath.

And so, the preparation day of the Passover means the preparation for the Sabbath in the Passover week, which means Friday in the Passover week, which means Passover has already happened. There are other arguments we can make about the alleged discrepancy. There's a huge hundred years now of scholarship on this question, which in my opinion is quite needless.

It all arises from this philological misunderstanding. There is no discrepancy between John's gospel and then synoptics on the date of the Passover. They all agree that it was Passover on the Last Supper, and then Jesus was crucified on Friday.

This would seem to be a good example of the way in which just knowing some of the Jewish sources will resolve something that wastes a lot of time in needless scholarship otherwise. Yeah, and this is an instance of extra biblical Jewish sources confirming, right? Because Josephus, writing Judeo-Greek, also uses the locution per escoate to Pascha and per escoate to Sabbath, and uses it in exactly the same way as the New Testament does. So, could you recreate the scene of the Last Supper? What would it look like? Well, I want to here tip my hat to an unbelieving New Testament scholar and an expert on Aramaic, which I'm not, that is Maurice Casey, late Maurice Casey.

For all his skepticism about Jesus, he has done, I think, really a service to New Testament scholarship and his efforts to reconstruct the Last Supper scene. One of the things he points out is that Jesus and his disciples come, he comes with the twelve after he sent some other disciples ahead to secure the room, and that indicates to us that we should not be thinking of just Pace, Leonardo da Vinci, and all our iconic depictions of the Last Supper. We shouldn't just be thinking of Jesus and his disciples, the twelve.

We should be thinking of Jesus and the twelve, perhaps at one table, and then within the same room, maybe as many as thirty total disciples. There's a distinction between those who went ahead to prepare and Jesus and the twelve who come later. It also helps make sense of Jesus's answer to the Lord who's going to betray you when he says, it's one of the twelve.

What need to say that if he and the twelve are the only ones in the room? Now, there is then this controversy that I get into in the book, especially Boak Boxer, who is a Jewish historian of the origins of Passover liturgy. The Passover Haggadah, as we have it, is medieval. And the question arises, can we really talk about a Seder, an ordered liturgy of Passover in the time of the New Testament? And Boxer and some others, Joshua Culp, have denied that there was any such thing.

And in the book, I argue they're mistaken. And the main reason that they're mistaken is that they're not taking seriously the New Testament itself as evidence for Jewish practice in the first century. The fact that we have apparently specified cups, the cup after supper, the cup of blessing, which we bless, Paul says, indicates that there's some sort of sequence of cups.

And then David Darber also points out some other Jewish regulations about Passover being followed even after the supper, that Jesus and his disciples stay together, they sing a hymn, Hallel Psalms, which are prescribed for the Passover. And then they go out to the Mount of Olives. And Jesus asks his disciples to continue to stay awake and pray.

And he actually comes back and checks on them. And Mark's Gospel says, they didn't know what to answer him. Well, there are Jewish regulations about preserving the group that is liturgically celebrating the Passover.

And if you fall asleep, are you still celebrating? Or are you out? Oh, no, you're done. You fell asleep. You're no longer participating in the spiritual celebration with the rest of us.

And the regulation that the rabbis lay down, and this is, of course, after the New Testament, but it's probably something like it is at work. Here's again, our principle. Why would Jesus, why would Mark's Gospel tell us that Jesus comes back and they didn't know what to answer him? The answer is that if a man can reply at random, huh, what? Then he's just dozing and he's not really out.

Whereas if you have to nudge him awake, then he's, as Jesus says, you are sleeping the rest of the way. This is a little word that English translations like to leave out. Jesus literally tells his disciples, well, I came checked on you before and you were kind of dozing, but now we're done with our Passover celebration.

So that's context, indicating that it is a Passover and that these Jewish regulations are at work. And then let's focus on the core, what most of the book is about, which is Jesus

taking bread and saying, this is my body. And I want to apologize to a certain bishop known to me who gave a talk on these words, and he sort of underlines that taking a page out of Martin Luther and the Marburg Disputation where Martin Luther writes, Hoc est corpus in beer froth on the table and underlines est, right? Or Pescesus Robertus saying, he doesn't say this is the symbol or the virtue of my body, but this is my body.

Well, we could ask, and maybe we'll talk about this later, but is that really how we take the word is in most of our instances when it's used? Is it really, this is metaphysically identical to this other thing? Do we use the word is that way most of the time? And I'm suggesting no, what we need to do is treat that utterance, this is my body, as something that, although we might find it mysterious, nobody in the room did. The Gospels are pretty good at telling us when Jesus' disciples were clueless. Is it because we forgot to bring bread? Lord, let's make three tabernacles, one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah.

He didn't know what he was saying. There's not a reticence in the Gospels about what boneheads the disciples can be sometimes. And there's no mention of that here.

Everybody in the room seems to have understood what Jesus was saying. And I think there's good reason for them to have understood it, if they're all Jews who have celebrated Passover since they could eat. And if that's the case, then we're dealing with what I call a high context utterance, not a low context utterance.

And by that I mean, you know, if a statement can be understood by someone who's not from this culture, who doesn't have background, who can just look up words in a dictionary if they might even speak it in the language. So Washington, DC is the capital of the United States, a pretty low context utterance. But a wedding cake is a pretty high context ritual.

And why is the bride stuffing it into the groom's mouth? Why is there this rigmarole where they make a big to do about cutting the first piece of it? So there's more to it. And when we're dealing with highly ritual occasions, we can't just waltz in and assume we're going to understand everything that was going on. And it doesn't get more high context than the Passover.

Here's a not just a ritual meal, but one that is steeped in Israel's history, that is part of the foundation story for the entire nation, and the birth of the nation and the Exodus, as you pointed out, in your own little book on echoes of the Exodus, it just reverberates throughout the entire Bible. It's the paradigm for what salvation is in the Jewish mind. And so if you've got a meal like this, where Jews are gathered once a year, and it's sort of a combination of Independence Day, and, you know, a religious festival, and it's not just religious, but it's also nationalistic, so that rebels, people like Judas of Galilee in the days of the census, choose Passover as the time to launch their rebellions.

That's the sort of resonance that it has in the Jewish mind. So for Jews who are then gathered and sitting down, having celebrated this annual full of patriotic and nationalistic understandings of what its symbols represent, reaching back into their past for their birth as a nation, but also understanding themselves as the people of God, the people whose destiny and story the Lord is orchestrating in history, nothing could be more natural than for them to eat this bread, thinking of the Exodus, but also as they do today, next year in Jerusalem, they say at the end of the Passover, an eschatological expectation that as God rescued us in the past, so he's going to rescue us again by the hand of the Messiah. So for Jesus to sit down at a meal like that, with all of this semiotic baggage, with all these expectations, in a room full of Jews who knew all this, and to pick up that bread, that's absolutely not a sort of tabula rasa, no context, let's just parse what the word is means.

That is absolutely the wrong way to approach that utterance. Instead, we need to ask, what did it mean in the context of Passover for Jews in that day? So he's taking something that's already deeply freighted with symbolic meaning, and relating all of that to himself. One of the things that I think really comes to the foreground in the sort of account that you're giving is the eschatological, which you've mentioned, and the messianic aspects of the supper, which can often be occluded within accounts of the supper that just do not take into account the Jewish background.

Can you say a bit more about the way in which the messianic elements and the eschatological elements derive from the actual Passover celebration itself? Sure. I guess there's a quotation by M.T. Wright that I wanted to include in my book, and I didn't include it because I lost track of where it came from. So if any hearers of this podcast are able to tell me where I'm dimly remembering it from, please shoot me a message and help me out.

But M.T. Wright says, the Eucharist should be celebrated nerataivoi. That is, we need to understand that we are being inscribed into the story of the Messiah, his death and resurrection and reign and coming again. And that itself is the climax and the crowning chapter of Israel's story.

And so if we want to understand how the Eucharist works, how the Last Supper is underwriting the Eucharist and how it's relating to the Eucharist, how the Last Supper is relating to the events of Jesus's death and resurrection, and to our union with Jesus in his death and our future resurrection, if we want to understand that all, then we should look at the Passover of the Old Testament as a paradigm for how Jews thought about this. We shouldn't go grab Aristotelian talk about substances and accidents. I like to say that's sort of like using quantum mechanics to explain a wedding cake.

It's an inappropriate discourse. It's using terms that don't apply. So, Jews in the Upper Room in the first century, and thereafter Jews and God-fearing proselytes who converted

to Christianity and during the ministry of Paul, what paradigm did they have for thinking about a ritual meal that related to saving events? The answer is the Old Testament Passover, which was prescribed by God in advance of the facts.

Here's what you need to do. Take a lamb, eat unloving blood, have your loins girded, be ready to go, and then the angel of death will come through Egypt and strike all the firstborn and spare you because you put the blood on your doorpost. I mean, one of the interesting things in Exodus chapter 12 is there's a sort of temporal break in the narrative where you're reading through this narrative and there's got lots of dramatic energy with all the plagues, and then suddenly you're taken out of Egypt.

You're placed in some situation at some vague point in the future, and then you're looking back and you're saying when they were in Egypt, God told Moses, instructing him concerning the Passover, and then you have that directed towards the first practice, but it's already inscribed in that as the expectation of all these future practices and this disjunction in time. You're taken out of that time to a later time looking back, but then also having the energy going forward of that original event. So we have three parts in both instances, both with regard to the original Passover in the land, the events of the Exodus, and the memorial Passover is thereafter.

Sorry, original Passover in Egypt, events of the Exodus, and then Passover is in the land later. And then on the other hand, in the New Testament, the Last Supper before the facts of the cross and resurrection, the actual events that happened to Jesus, and then retrospective Eucharist thereafter, during the unto his memorial. I don't think that's a coincidence, and I think one of the best rabbinic quotations that I appeal to in the book, I think it's probably by Paul's teacher Gamaliel, the first, which is recited in the Passover Haggadah by Jews to this day.

He says that, in every generation, every Jew who partakes of the Passover is duty bound to regard himself as though he personally have passed out of Egypt, when in fact he hasn't. He was born in the land, or grew up in Jewish ghetto in Spain or Germany. He's never been to Egypt in his life.

But there's this as if he, as if he personally had passed out of Egypt. And it's really striking to me how closely that matches with the way the Apostle Paul talks about our union with Christ. That I have been crucified with Christ.

That I want to be conformed to his suffering so that I may also share in his resurrection. That you clothe yourself with Christ. It's a baptismal language as well, but not exclusively baptismal.

So we are to be considering ourselves to have been crucified and dead with Christ. We've died to the Torah. We've died to the world.

We've died to the flesh and to sin and to the old creation so that we may be married to another, so that we may live to the spirit. We may please God. And there's this inscribing of every participant of the Eucharist into the events of Jesus' death and resurrection.

And I think if we don't celebrate the supper narratively, if we forget about all that, if we don't think about Israel's story, if we don't think about Israel's Messiah, then we really lose quite a lot. And some other discourse will take the place of that Jewish narrative to our impoverishment. And we'll start thinking of it as a purely vertical transaction between us and a Christ who isn't particularly Jewish, who doesn't, you know, his death on a Roman cross in Judea in the first century is neither here nor there.

And it's more about the sort of spiritual power and elements that are imbued with it. And I think there are some other problems that can arise when we depascalize and de-Judaize the meal that we're having. It can become this strange sort of totemistic thing.

Superstition arises easily. Before we know it, we're bowing down to elements or putting them in a monstrance or treating them in a superstitious way or worried about whether mice are going to be eating them or licking up spilled wine off our carpets, none of which is really appropriate. And would never occur to a Jew thinking about a ritual meal.

Nobody treats Passover food that way. That's just not in the same field of discourse that would occur to a first century Jew. Now, I want to press a bit on some of the point that you'd be making about the background in the biblical celebration of the Passover, because it seems to me that what you're arguing is not actually the biblical celebration of the Passover, but the history of celebrations of the Passover.

That we don't actually have the description of the bread and the wine in the actual biblical institution. These are things that develop later. So it's a history of Passover celebrations that the Last Supper comes within that.

Can you say a bit more about how we're supposed to regard these things as Christians, because I think many would be nervous. These are accretions to the biblical practice. These aren't actually part of what God instituted.

How can we argue that we're basing something as fundamental as the Last Supper, which leads to the Lord's Supper, upon these accretions, rather than the fundamental event? Well, I think the first thing I'd say is that we're not pressing the details all that much. I'm not suggesting that we need to grab the Talmud sequence of four cups of wine and press the meaning of each cup and make sure that our Eucharist is identified with the right cup and has all the right meaning there. I think there's a reason why the Gospels, written in Greek, intended to be circulated to a Greek-speaking audience, often skate over pretty quickly a lot of this Jewish background.

There's an awareness that it's not going to have the same significance to Gentiles that it

did to the original Jewish audience. And that maybe it isn't even necessary for you to know all the details. I think what is necessary is that we norm our pondering and our theorizing about the mechanics of it, that we try as much as possible to do that in ways that are available and culturally appropriate to Jesus and his disciples, who were, as far as I'm aware, not Aristotelian philosophers.

So I just want to lower the stakes a little bit. Let's be clear that I'm not pushing in that way. I think we see, particularly in certain areas of Messianic Judaism today, people for whom being as Jewish, a Jewish Christian as you can, is the whole game.

They're just keeping kosher and observing the Sabbath. And they're doing a lot of things that the Apostle Paul would probably call Judaizing. And that's not at all what I'm suggesting.

I don't think it's important for us to read back every detail of the medieval Passover onto the first century Last Supper and follow it all if we can. That I don't think is at all the intention of the New Testament authors. That's why they've left out an awful lot.

And the other thing I would note is that the details that we get, like dipping in the dish with me, Jesus says, well, there's details about dipping herbs on Passover and in the Talmud and the Mishnah, and in the Midi-Morchada. But it's very just offhand, and by the way, in the New Testament, there's no huge significance attached to it. There's no striving to preserve that and bring it into the Eucharist later or something.

And then there's a whole, probably a whole lot of rituals and details and customs regarding the Passover that are simply omitted completely from our gospel accounts. Why? Because the focus in the gospel accounts is on what was different about this Passover. That it was the Passover Jesus was eating with his disciples the night before he was about to get crucified.

And so, there's a focus on the new things that he did and the things that were pointing to his death. In other words, there's an awareness on the part of the New Testament authors that Jesus was taking up Passover and making it about his death now, so that those events are the core of what the Eucharist is about. And we need to be, I think, focused on finding the meaning of the Eucharist in those events and doing so in ways that were available to Jewish thinkers in the first century.

I think that raises, for me, one of the issues that I think many people will have in their mind, which is when we see the Lord's Supper, there are clear differences between the Lord's Supper and the Passover. We're not celebrating it just once every year, for instance. And we're not celebrating in Jerusalem, where a number of other things about the larger meal have been omitted.

We're having this particular rite. How can your understanding... Are you saying that it is

just a new Passover, or are you saying there are other elements and roots that are involved? Yeah, there's always... and there's quite a literature on this as well. There's always been a challenge of explaining how is it, if the Last Supper is a Passover meal, why do we do the more than weekly? Why is there such frequent breaking of bread? And what's the relationship between the two? So, I do think there's some interesting literature on possible other antecedents.

And I owe you one of them, Oscar Coleman's essays on the Lord's Supper, but also Andrew McGowan's *Ascetic Eucharist*. And here, I want to caution everybody about a trend in modern scholarship, which is that the attempt to make things so diverse, so multifarious, that we can't talk about unities anymore. So, many tables, multiple Eucharistic rites.

You know, McGowan points to practices of a lot of different quasi-Christian, some of them heretical, sects, Evianites, Gnostics, that had meals where they used water instead of wine, or where they had salt or fish, or other elements that were not the bread and the wine of the Jesus institution. I think he makes too much of this, and he's casting this net too widely. That said, particularly Coleman, I think he's right to suggest that there's also a connection to the daily meals that Jesus had with his disciples, and especially to the meals that he had with them after his resurrection, where he ate fish and breakfasted on the shore to the sea of Galilee with them.

There's also a peculiar little verb in Acts 1, that looks like it's from Chalice, to have salt with somebody. So, another indication that there were other meals using other foods that people look back at and recall having shared with Jesus. And I'm open to the idea that there was a process by which this supper became regularized, a process in which maybe disciples after Jesus' resurrection may have remembered other meals than the last supper.

But I think by the time we get to 1 Corinthians, which is a fairly early epistle in the New Testament, what we see there is that the pastoral background, the Passover, has won out, and that Christians are talking, they're saying things like, Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us, therefore let us keep the feast. So, I want to recognize that there is some diversity early on, but I do think that the solemnity and the impressive occasion of Passover, and also the semiotic resonances of the Passover elements, the food, the wine, and the bread, I think these may have been telling factors that impel the church to take that as the main paradigm for understanding what we're doing, as it is to this day. So, you've mentioned already the issue of mechanics, which has been one of the deepest areas of debate over the history of the church.

It seems to me that at the very outset we should distinguish between the question, for instance, the question of Christ's presence at the supper, which is a different sort of question than the question of the mechanics by which Christ gives himself to his people,

for instance. How would you approach the questions? First of all, the more substantive question of, is Christ present at the supper? And then the other question of mechanics, how should we think about these sorts of questions using that Jewish background and avoiding some of the extraneous philosophical frameworks that can be maybe more obfuscating than illuminating? I should put my cards on the table, even though I'm trying to write this book as a philologist and a scholar of Greek and a historian. I also am a confessional Christian with my own documents and tradition, and among them is the Book of Common Prayer and the Declaration on Kneeling, the so-called Black Rubric, which addresses itself to some of these questions of presence.

It goes out of its way to say, well, we kneel, but we're not kneeling because there's a local presence of Christ in the elements. The real natural value of Christ is in heaven and not on earth, and that's where he wants to be worshipped. And especially the Carolina Vines, like Lancelot Andrews, they had a fair amount to say about, is it acceptable for us to say there's a local presence or presence in the elements that we should direct our worship to? And I said, no, we're worshipping Christ in the elements, outside the elements, wherever he may be, but we're not bowing down to the bread as though there were local presence there.

Let me make an analogy. When we're asking questions of mechanics, how do things happen in the case of the supper room, the apostle Paul had very little patience for questions of mechanics in 1 Corinthians 15, when he's entertaining how does the resurrection of the body happen? With what sort of body do they come? He has no patience for it. It's the question of scoffers, the question of Sadducees, and it's really an attempt to explain something that's accomplished by the power of God.

My concern is that it's frequently a way to smuggle in metaphysical systems and philosophical concepts that aren't applicable. So in the case of the supper, there's this additional risk of trying to explain the mechanics, how does this happen, using alien discourses from philosophical theology, and that risk is that it will deform our piety. It will invite us to do things that we shouldn't be doing.

And we look in vain in the earliest patristic sources for adoration of the Eucharistic elements, let alone things like Corpus Christi processions, or monstrances. That's just not seen in the earliest church. So what we need, again, approaching this as a historical problem, we need an explanation for what Jewish Christians were thinking that's available to them, and that would give rise to this sort of vividly realistic language that we find.

So for instance, I think it's Ignatius talking about heretics don't use the Eucharist because they deny that it is the body of Christ. Well, nobody is treating it at that point the way you might see Roman Catholics treat the Eucharistic elements today. But we need an account that will be vivid enough and give us enough of a realism that we would

talk that way.

And there's more work to be done. I don't claim to have done a lot on this book. I'm not a philosophical theologian, and here we're getting into questions of philosophical theology.

But I would really like to see the starting point of mechanical explanations be Galileo's victim or something like that. I think one of the things with the metaphysical explanations, they tend to obscure two key things. First of all, the personal character of this is an act.

Christ is communicating himself personally. This is not just a thing. And I think many of the metaphysical accounts end up reifying Christ's presence, treating it as a thing to be contained, moved around.

That's an endemic problem and an artifact of Greek metaphysics generally, because Greek metaphysics is designed to be depersonalized. Whereas biblical metaphysics is personal all the way down. The world is created by the utterances of a personal God.

So if you're going to do metaphysics, let's start with that. Let's not have reified objects, essences and things like that. That seems to me to be the primary problem.

And then there's a secondary problem, which is that those metaphysics almost invariably spatialize things. They're trying to think in terms of spatial categories and the temporal categories that are so fundamental to biblical metaphysics just fall away. And I think the key to answering both of those problems is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The spirit is the spirit of Christ. It's a personal presence, a personal act. And then it's also, I think it's Douglas Farrow has an article between a rock and a hard place, towards a reformed doctrine of the Eucharist when he was still reformed.

And he argues within that, that there's something about the spirit in Calvin's understanding is the means by which we participate in Christ. And so Calvin tries to have a more personal account of God's, Christ's gift of himself in the Eucharist. But what he misses, according to Farrow, is that this should be a temporal account that Christ, the spirit joins things that are far distance in time, not just in space.

And so that personal action, I think, is important. And I will go to John's gospel and the Eucharistic discourse or the discourse in the farewell discourse. There are a number of elements there that I think would be the route for a more helpful thinking through of what's happening as Christ communicates himself to his people.

I have a lot of sympathy with Calvin on the spirit and the Eucharist. Two cautions. One, I want to avoid what I think some people conceive of when they, particularly those who are fond of having an epiclesis, a calling down of the spirit during the consecration of the elements and salvation of the Eucharist.

And that makes it sound like, well, okay, the Holy Spirit, as in Raphael's disputation, the disputation of the sacrament, depicting the Holy Spirit coming down from the Father and the Son onto the monsters. And so that that's what we mean, that there's a metaphysical transformation and the spirit is going to come down and do that piece of magic for us. I'd like to avoid that.

And then the second aspect that I really think, and I pushed this some in the book, needs to inform our understanding of mechanics is we need to treat the Eucharist as a ritual meal. And that involves a social and horizontal dimension. And I have a real difficulty, not just with Roman Catholicism on this point, but also with certain elements of the reformed tradition, particularly New England Puritans.

Christians sort of shutting down within themselves, curling up like little potato bugs in the pew, meditating, because they think that the Eucharist is operating between their temples in their head, as they remember and believe, and that that's the way it works. The great expression, edible flashcards. Flashcards, right? The Eucharistic elements are edible flashcards.

And I want to say as strongly as I can, your eyes should be open. You should see your brothers and sisters, fellow members of the body of Christ, sharing in this meal, because you're not saved as an individual with a sort of satellite upload link, or download to give you the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit individually. You're knit together in one body with all these other people in the spirit of Christ dwells in you as his temple, you plural.

And I think there are certain, I mean, there are other things that have happened, just as historical accidents and matters of development of ritual over the years that also pose difficulties for us. So the shrinking of the elements to this token, tiny little amount, my flesh is food indeed, but not very much. And it's, and I hate to say it in many churches, it's just absolutely tasteless styrofoam wafer that melts in your mouth, not in your hand.

And, you know, sort of sticks to the back of your palate. Well, how about we have some real bread with real taste? How about we rip our hunks of it? That's what I would like to see. Let's make it a little more meal-ish, maybe even give people more than a tiny little medicinal cough medicine size dose of wine.

And yeah, use real wine. So the weirder it gets, the more we move from natural meal and from the ritual context in which it's instituted, the easier it can be for us to slip into thinking about it in weird ways and treating it in a superstitious manner. So just talking about the bread and the wine, and the horizontal meaning, could you say a bit about the way in which that relates to our unity as the body of Christ, that it's not just about receiving Christ as an individual, but in some way also receiving each other? Yeah.

So we need to remember that the bread is not just that which Jesus picked up and said, this is my body, this is me. It's not just identified with him, but it's also identified with us,

as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10. And this comes out in a lot of the early literatures, like the didactic, that as the grain on the various hillsides has been gathered together into one and made one loaf, as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 10, so we who are many are one bread, one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

It very much is a corporate unity. That's what Jesus has wrought by redeeming a people for himself. And it's in keeping with the original Passover as well.

He didn't rescue isolated individual Jews. He brought them out as a people. So we have relationship, one with each other.

And that should be front and center in our celebration. That's why I say our eyes should be open. Do you have what you want to say on that? Yes, I think it's very helpful to think through some of the statements that Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 10, and also in 11, where the problem of celebration of the Eucharist, where people are at odds with each other, not receiving each other, they're going ahead of each other.

In that sort of situation, the very fundamental meaning of the Eucharist is at stake for Paul. You're not gathering together to celebrate the supper. And I put it in the book.

Paul nowhere suggests that if you say the wrong words, you'll botch the whole ceremony, and it won't work. But he does say that if you shun the poor, and treat this as a private meal to disgorge yourself, that it's not the Lord's supper. So yeah, absolutely essential.

And this, I think, gets into bigger questions, which we don't have time for here. How does biblical ritual work, as opposed to quasi magical rituals that many people think in terms of? And when you think about how does a sacrifice prove efficacious? There are ways in that works within a biblical approach that I think many people just don't understand. And it makes it very difficult for them to understand something like the supper as just a ritual with efficacy, but without a magical sort of process.

Lighthouse is very helpful on this, by the way, that rituals actually accomplish things in the world and they change the way things are married. So one thing I want to get into, which you've mentioned a bit about some of the ways that a misunderstanding of the supper and its Jewish background has led to unhelpful practices. Now, it seems to me that your approach also opens up potential for ecumenical dialogue and progress.

Could you say a bit about that? Yeah. That's one of the things that was born in upon me as I finished writing the book, which is that the things I'm saying the Eucharist is about, Jesus being Israel's King, us being his people and united to him by the Spirit, us sharing his death and resurrection. Those are things that every Christian agrees about.

That's not some distinctive, obscure doctrine from the Council of Trent, some peculiarity of the Westminster Standards, of the Augsburg Confession, because it's grounded in

history and what actually happened. And history is ecumenical. That's one of the problems with dividing between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith is that every tradition can make up their own Christ of faith that is divorced from the things that actually happened.

And so I'm hopeful. I would like to think that these are things that we might be able to unite around. And that the more we think about the Eucharist as relating to these historical verities, the less our contentious and peculiar parochial understandings of Eucharistic theology will pose an obstacle.

And then perhaps also the focus on the horizontal dimension of it, and the oneness of the body of Christ should be an impetus for us to recognize others. I've always really treasured the peculiarity of the Reformed Church, which has altered the Book of Common Prayer in very few regards. They're pretty much using straight 1660 Book of Common Prayer, but they've added a preparatory invitation to the Eucharist.

When the priest is about to embark upon the Eucharistic liturgy, he turns to the assembled church and says, our fellow Christians of other branches of Christ's Church and all who love our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in sincerity are affectionately invited to the Lord's table. And so that that emphasis on the horizontal dimension should be an impetus for us to unite with other Christians, not make a peculiar Eucharistic theology an obstacle. Just as we conclude, I'd like to step back a bit.

And as I said, at the beginning, one of the things that your book is, is not just a study of the Lord's Supper in particular, but a broader methodological plea to New Testament scholars and others to pay attention to these Jewish sources. And what are some of the ways in which you think that attention to rabbinic sources might provide illumination on other issues of Christian reflection? I'm actually working on a second book right now, which is on the origins of church office, and the relation of the apostolate to episcopacy. And I am deep in the Jewish sources again.

The Jewish concept of the shalia, the sent one, the emissary, that's it. It's a Jewish social institution that was used for all kinds of things, sending and receiving bills of divorce, purchasing land, doing real estate transactions, offering sacrifices. It's a piece of Jewish background that a lot of people don't recognize and realize is at work.

Or the laying on of hands, almost every Christian tradition does this now, right? That when you ordained a bishop, or sometimes a sort of rugby scrum of Presbyterian elders gathers around you and lays hands on you. Well, this is a deeply Jewish ritual. It has background in the Old Testament in Moses' ordination of Joshua, but it continues to be used and there's rabbinic pronouncements about how it should be used.

And so that's another huge area of research that the Jewish background is very beneficial for. And I'm eager to get this next book published. Maybe I can come share it

with you again when it comes out.

But I do think we're also living in a wonderful time for this sort of thing. It used to be that Walter Gullman in Nazi Germany could write a book claiming that Jesus the Galilean wasn't a real Jew and had nothing to do with Jewish Judaism. No one thinks that now.

You cannot do New Testament scholarship without some awareness of the Jewish background. I do think there are some developments that are not going to last, for instance, the so-called apocalyptic Paul, which I think is also a way of removing Paul from Judaism and not having to deal with the Jewish background to make him sort of presenting Jesus as a bolt from the blue with no Jewish roots. That's not going to last.

And I think M.C. Wright has criticized that school thought quite effectively. But we're living in a good time. There's more dialogue between Christians and Jews.

While I was writing this book, Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati changed its curriculum so that all its rabbinic students who are training to be rabbis have to read the New Testament now. That's huge. I could wish that Christian seminaries would do similar things with some of the rabbinic sources.

I think most seminarians, they can escape from seminary having read some Josephus and maybe some Philo, but maybe not as much of rabbinic as I would like to see. But I think the trend is upward. Thank you so much for joining me, Matthew.

This is an absolutely fantastic book. The book, again, is *The Lost Supper*. I'll give links to where you can purchase a copy.

And Matt, I'd love to have you on again to discuss your forthcoming book. Thank you so much, Alistair. It was a real privilege.

God bless and thank you for listening.