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Passover story reflects fundamental beliefs of both Jews and Christians, says teacher



Left to right: the Rev. Jerry R. Turner, minister of Government Street United Methodist Church and president of the Mobile Ministerial Association; Rabbi Steven L. Jacobs, spiritual leader of Spring Hill Avenue Temple; and Dr. Michael A. Signer, lecturer.

The biblical story about God's deliverance of Jews from bondage in Egypt causes modern-day Jews and Christians to recognize "our need for renewal," according to a Jewish scholar.

DR. MICHAEL A. Signer, associate professor of Jewish history at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles, spoke at this year's Ministerial Institute.

Spring Hill Avenue Temple has served as host for 23 years of the institute which is attended by Christian clergy of many denominations.

Signer noted that Jews and Christians in their Scriptures share the Passover story of the Jews' exodus from Egypt. The Jews and Christians have differences, as well as some similarities, in interpretations.

Besides having the story of Passover in their Old Testament, Christians traditionally have referred to the New Testament account of the Last Supper of Jesus as a Passover meal, or a Seder.

SIGNER SAID, "There is sufficient disagreement among biblical scholars today to debate whether or not the Last Supper was indeed a Seder or whether it was merely a first-century table fellowship."

Saying he was not going to become involved in the debate, Signer said, however, that in the New Testament book of Acts "the Passover was celebrated in the early church."

He said, "We know that the Passover was celebrated by the early Christians in some form."

FOR JEWS, Signer said, Passover became their principal festival.

"This is our first festival. Why? Because it reminds us of our redemption, of our liberation."

Passover, Signer said, began to take on a concrete form in the ritual of the church and in rabbinic literature.

The Haggadah is the Jewish book containing the story of the Exodus and the ritual of the Passover meal. The Haggadah is read at the meal.

For the Passover rite in the Haggadah, Signer noted, "we have special foods upon the table; we have four cups of wine celebrating four promises of redemption; we have children who ask questions; we have a narrative of God's saving act, or God's act of redemption; and we give thanks to God with ... Psalms.

"**SO THIS** then becomes a

period of narration about God's saving act amongst the Jews."

In the early church, according to Signer, the Passover "was the time of initiation in the church, the time when the catechumens, or those who desired entry into the Christian community, were received."

Signer said that St. Augustine, one of the greatest leaders of the early Christian Church who lived in northern Africa in the latter part of the fourth century and the early part of the fifth century, preached a sermon to catechumens in the Christian Church.

In the sermon, Augustine said Passover "should not pass by like any other night but be brought to the minds of the devout persons."

THOSE WORDS, Signer said, quickly bring to mind a question asked by a child in the Jewish observance of the Passover meal: "Why is this night different from all other nights?"

The child's father responds, "Because on this night we celebrate and we remember we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt."

Signer said, "For both Jews and Christians, part of the interpretation of the redemptive act of God is that it is in that act that we choose to initiate those who come seeking the truth of our faiths."

In the Jewish observance, a "simple child" asks, "What is going on here?" The answer is given that God brought the Jews out of Egypt.

Said Signer, "The act of initiation is the act of redemption."

HE ADDED, however, "If one celebrates God's act of redemption as an act of initiation, that would then be a one-time act in which people enter."

Further, if according to a rabbinic interpretation of the

Jewish observance, the food is to keep children awake so that they will ask questions, "one could then confine the Passover Seder to the nursery school ... and never celebrate it again."

YET, SIGNER said, according to the early rabbis, as well as St. Augustine and St. Isidore of Seville, Passover is "a festival of change. It is a time of moving from one state to the other."

St. Isidore of Seville was an archbishop and theologian of the Christian Church in Spain in the latter part of the sixth century and the early part of the seventh century.

Signer said that according to the rabbis, "even if we were all learned, even if we were all sages ... we would still be obliged to tell the miracle of the Passover. Indeed whoever dwells upon it at length is deemed praiseworthy."

According to Signer, St. Augustine said that since Jesus moved from this world to the heavenly Father, "therefore my brethren if we want to keep Easter in a salutary way, let us be converted. Let us be changed. Let us suffer. Let us care for others. Let us pass from sin into holiness. Let us feed the poor."

THE JEWISH Passover rite includes a similar notion of passing from one state to another, according to Signer.

Signer quoted a rabbinic statement: "We begin this story with our degradation. We conclude it in praise of God."

Each Jew, Signer said, is ritually and morally obliged "to see himself or herself as though that person made the journey out of Egypt."

The Jewish rite, Signer said, includes a prayer which is an invitation to the poor. According to rabbinic teaching, no one should consider himself wealthy

and thus celebrate Passover by himself.

SIGNER SAID, "There is an ancient Jewish tradition of a collection of charitable monies to feed the poor at Passover time."

Signer noted that for Jews the redemptive act is the exodus from Egypt, and for Christians the exodus from Egypt is interpreted in terms of the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ.

For both Jews and Christians, however, an emphasis has become the sharing with the poor. The change, or moving from one state to another, involves "sharing what one has with other people."

PASSOVER FOR both Jews and Christians is seen as a time of hope, Signer said.

He said that St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a Christian monastic theologian in France in the 12th century, delivered a sermon in which he said the season of Passover not only is a time to participate in Christ's death and resurrection, but Passover is a time of being assured of "forgiveness and freedom of sin."

Jews who recite the Passover ritual are assured of "God's hope and trust," Signer said.

WHILE PASSOVER has some similar meanings for Jews and Christians, Signer said, it also has differences.

Bernard of Clairvaux described Jesus' entry into the tomb as representing Israel according to the flesh, or the Jewish people. The empty tomb represented Christ's resurrection, or the Christian people.

Thus for Christians, Passover came to represent the Jews' blindness to the truth while the empty tomb represents hope.

DURING A period of confrontation between Jews and Christians in the 12th and 13th centuries, Signer said, some Psalms were added to the Jewish Passover ritual.

One Psalm begins, "Pour forth your wrath O Lord on the nations that knew not Jacob and persecuted him."

In concluding, Signer called the Passover "a mirror for the Jewish and Christian faith communities of what I would call our significant ultimates."

SIGNER SAID Israel for the Jews meant the liberation from Egypt "by the mighty hand of God." Israel for the Christians meant "the liberation from death and the promise of eternal life through the death and resurrection of Jesus."