

A New Pascha

Let God arise, and let his enemies be scattered and let them who hate him flee from before his face.

[Psalm 67.2 LXX]

Today Christ, our saving Pascha, hath been revealed to us; a noble Pascha; the Pascha new and holy; the mystical Pascha; the Pascha all august; the blameless Pascha; the great Pascha; the Pascha of the faithful; the Pascha which openeth to us the gates of paradise; the Pascha which sanctifieth the faithful.

—*The Paschal Verses*

While there is much to unpack in the above Paschal verse, let us focus on the word ‘new’. Often we hear that *Pascha* is the Greek word for *Passover*. St John the Evangelist witnesses to the early celebration of Pascha by thrice distinguishing the Jewish Passover from it (πάσχα τῶν Ἰουδαίων in John 2.13 & 11.55 with similar wording in 6.4). The theme of Pascha is throughout the Scriptures. So before we can understand the New Pascha, we must first understand the Old Pascha.

Pascha in the Exodus — the Original Pascha

Much of Scripture is written as a polemic against pagan practices and deities. One of the clearest instances of this is in the Exodus story; each of the Ten Plagues was directed at an Egyptian god. For example, the Nile was revered as the bringer of life to Egypt. When Moses turned the Nile into blood (Exodus 7.14 ff.) he made the source of life into a source of death so that the fish died and the Egyptians could not drink of it.

In the final plague, God struck down the first-born of Egypt including Pharaoh’s son (Pharaoh was worshipped as a god) and freed Israel from Egyptian bondage. He instituted the Pascha to celebrate (and for later generations to participate in) that great act. As an indicator of its importance, the preface to the Ten Commandments states, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” (Exodus 20.2 OSB) Truly God had conquered the powers of evil to redeem his people.

Pascha in the Exile — Pascha Revisited

The Scriptures point us to Pascha in how the restoration of Israel from captivity in Babylon is described. Indeed, one of the first things the returned exiles did was celebrate Pascha (2 Ezra/ Ezra 2.19). Daniel describes the destruction of the Babylonians as an act of God with a supernatural hand writing out prophecy on the wall of the palace (ch 5). The second portion of Isaiah (ch 40–66) is largely taken up with the theme of the restoration of the Exile. God’s liberation in the return from the Exile will be greater than the redemption from Egypt. Whereas God provided water in the wilderness in the Exodus, in the Return the wilderness will be turned into pools of water (Isaiah 41.18).

Pascha Exalted — the New Pascha

Christ fulfilled — in the sense of filling to the fullest — the Law and the Prophets. The theme of Pascha is expanded and filled full. St Matthew applies to Jesus the words “Out of Egypt I called my son” (Matthew 2.15 quoting Hosea 11.1). The next chapter connects the ministry of St John

the Forerunner “The voice of one crying in the wilderness...” with Isaiah’s depiction of the Return from Exile (ch. 40).

St John shows Christ as the true Paschal Lamb from the beginning of his Gospel where St John the Forerunner states Jesus is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (1.29 ESV) to the crucifixion where Jesus is raised on the cross as the paschal lambs are being slaughtered (19.14).

In this great New Pascha the enemies that are defeated are not Pharaoh or the Babylonians but the Devil and Death. Indeed we find that these great enemies were behind the lesser enemies all along (Ephesians 6.12). We are liberated from the Devil and Death, brought up from the tombs and given life, and the gates of Paradise which have been shut against us from Adam’s rebellion are opened again and we are invited in. Can we conclude in any other way than by chanting:

*Christ is risen from the dead,
trampling down death by death,
and upon those in the tombs,
bestowing life!*