

**THE FORCE OF THE MYSTERY:
ANAMNESIS AND EXEGESIS IN *PERI PASCHA***

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ABSTRACT

This thesis takes as its starting point the conclusions of recent scholarship on the identification of Melito's *Peri Pascha* as a Quartodeciman paschal liturgy. As such, the document is of especial significance to many different fields of study – Scriptural exegesis, early Christian worship, ancient Jewish influences on Christianity, the Johannine tradition, preaching and rhetoric in the ancient church, to name just a few. The purpose of this thesis, then, is to begin an assessment of that significance through a study of Melito's Scriptural exegesis as it is conducted within the liturgical, or anamnistic, context of *Peri Pascha*. The research was carried out through a careful, word-by-word study of *Peri Pascha* itself, and then a study of the scholarship surrounding it. Much background research in ancient Jewish rites and early *kerygmatic* development in the Church was undertaken as well, in order to have a firm ground upon which to build the thesis. The conclusion which has been reached is that *Peri Pascha* employs a kind of exegesis which is fundamentally anamnistic in purpose and which seeks to reach that end by a skillful use of rhetoric and typology. The participant in the paschal liturgy is literally exegesized into the story and once in is taught the reality of the mystery in which he has become a part. Melito's exegesis is therefore a vigorous and vital one; he views the Scriptures as a living mystery which reveals Christ, and teaches us about a relationship between God and his people which is eternal and ever active. The revelation of Scripture therefore is the revelation of the reality of that relationship as it has been fulfilled in Christ.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction – 2

PART I – FROM GOOD FRIDAY SERMON TO CHRISTIAN RITE – A HISTORY OF SCHOLARSHIP

1. Introduction	5
2. Discovery of <i>Peri Pascha</i>	7
3. Arguments for the Homiletic Genre	9
4. Identification as a Liturgical Document	12

PART II – “THE ANCIENT LAW, OR RATHER, THE RECENT WORD” – ANAMNESIS IN *PERI PASCHA*

1. Christ Present in the Community	19
2. Remembrance / Anamnesis	22
3. Melito’s Paschal Haghadah	25
4. The Aphikomen Piece	28

PART III - “THE FORCE OF THE MYSTERY” – MELITO’S EXEGESIS

1. The Exegetical Quantum Leap	33
2. Melito and History	35
3. Melito and Scripture	36
4. The Mystery Revealed	38
5. The Role of Israel	42
6. Melito the Prophet	46

Conclusion	48
Appendix	51
Bibliography	53

ANTONIA BEGINS HER JOURNEY – INTRODUCTION

Sometime around nightfall in Sardis, a young woman stepped out from her front door onto the street, threw her cloak over her shoulder and around her neck and began the brisk walk through a cool early evening. The streets were quieter than usual tonight, fewer carriages jostling along in the wheel cuts of the roughly cobbled roads, fewer shopkeepers offering warm drinks and temple meats along the young woman's path. Sardis was usually a busy city, but tonight is the 14th Nissan, the Jewish night of Passover, and since the city had a growing Jewish population, all the festivities are inside. She passed through the main open square of the city, catching as she did the faint but unmistakable sounds of singing behind one of the house fronts – the words are in Hebrew. She tightens her cloak around her and hurries on with more conviction and more excitement in her pace.

We enter into a very different liturgical world with *Peri Pascha*. Imagine a liturgy with no Gospel, not even a reference to a Gospel. The words of Institution are missing as well, as is any mention of bread and wine. What we discover instead is just over 800 lines of reflection on the Exodus of the Hebrews and how it is fulfilled in Christ, with the dramatic self-proclamation of Christ through the person of the author at the end. The only parallel might be if we were to imagine waking up Sunday morning and going through all the bustle and arrangements to get to Church just to hear the first two or three Anaphora prayers describing the great deeds wrought by God, and then also eat the bread and wine associated with them. But this parallel ultimately limps from the fact that not only would *Peri Pascha's* celebration be held at night, but almost always on a day other than Sunday. This is not to mention the fact that our Anaphora prayers are so much shorter and are so different in form from Melito's text, though in both a similar story is told. In other words, the form which *Peri Pascha's* worship takes differs so drastically that it might seem irreconcilable to our own, and unrecognizable as classically Christian worship. But this would only be the case if *Peri Pascha's* function differed, if what was liturgically

celebrated in Sardis at Passover sometime in the 160's AD was somehow different from what we today celebrate on Sundays and at Pascha. At the heart of this thesis is the claim that not only do we encounter a liturgy in *Peri Pascha* which is fundamentally Christian, but that this liturgy and how and why it was celebrated has a great deal to teach us today about our own faith and worship.

The question before us, then, is what exactly has been accomplished in *Peri Pascha*? And how specifically has it been accomplished? *Peri Pascha* is the Quartodeciman Passover liturgy of the second century community under Melito. It is true, of course, that *Peri Pascha* is so much more as well. In addition to being a work of great rhetorical craftsmanship, an eminent example of the Asiatic second-sophistic style, it is also a Jewish Seder, a Greco-Roman Symposium, a collection of early Christian hymns, a time capsule of Quartodeciman belief and practice, and a treatise of early Patristic exegesis. *Peri Pascha* is a rare document for the many layers of Jewish, Christian and early philosophical thought it preserves, and is rarer for the completeness in which it has come down to us. However, all of these layers and form-elements are threads within Melito's larger tapestry, they are subsumed into the larger purpose of the work, which is the celebration and commemoration of the Lord's Pascha. The genius of the work then is in how well it uses all these means to accomplish its end, how skillfully form and content serve to accomplish meaning, and in how all of this is accomplished through the medium of liturgy.

The thesis presented here is that what Melito's liturgy essentially accomplishes is the anamnesis or remembrance of the living God through the celebration of the Paschal sacrifice of His Son. In other words, what Melito celebrates is functionally the same as

that which is celebrated in our own Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, Melito's distant descendent. Few Christians today would recognize the formal elements and structure of Melito's liturgy, but they would be, or should be, moved by it to the same conclusion. The task of this paper then is to explore this thesis in several key ways. First, as is essential for any study, we will begin with a history of the scholarship on Melito, showing the perambulations, the scopos, and the conclusions of thought on its topic. Second, and just as essential, this paper will explore the parameters and set out the details and contents of its thesis, namely the purpose, explicit and implicit, of *Peri Pascha*. Third, the means by which this purpose is accomplished by Melito will be explored; this will involve a detailed study of Melito's exegetical project and an analysis of his rhetorical deployment. Finally, this paper will provide a summary of its conclusions and a brief statement of its convictions based upon its findings. Indeed, fundamental to this paper is the conviction that *Peri Pascha* has an enormous amount of insight to offer contemporary scholarship in the fields of biblical exegesis and liturgical theology, not to mention Christian and Jewish history, as well as classical philosophy and literature. Of course, this paper's greater conviction is that Melito's faith in the Slain Lamb and the Redeemed Israel bears the same universal immediacy and will *in itself* be forever contemporary.

FROM GOOD FRIDAY HOMILY TO CHRISTIAN RITE – A HISTORY OF SCHOLARSHIP

Soon the young woman arrived at a large wooden door, painted a deep red with a colourful spring flower pattern decorating the arch. She knocked strongly, and was soon greeted warmly by an older man, clearly the household's slave who calls her in by name. "Antonia, come in. We have not begun yet, but we will shortly." She entered, and was escorted from the small entrance area just inside the door through a short hallway, with a room entrance on either side, into a large open roof courtyard with a decorative garden and pool in the middle and a walkway with more room entrances along the perimeter. She was taken around the perimeter to the opposite side of the courtyard and enters a large room. It was very dark inside, but there were a few lamps lit and she could see a gathering of maybe thirty or forty people. With the dim light of the lamps as her aid, she saw the bucolic scenes of the richly frescoed room, scenes which she knew well from having been a visitor here often and which she knew were fitting to the room's primary use for festive meals. She could just make out the mosaic pattern on the floor and she could see couches and wooden chairs along the walls with a prominent couch far to the other side of the room. Recognizing many of the faces smiling at her as she settled down on to her chair, she smiled back and waited in the quiet and the dark, hardly able to contain her expectation. Tonight was the Passover. Tonight, the Elder of her Sardis community, the venerable Melito, will lead the vigil and celebration dinner at which the mystery of the Passover, the Crucified Christ, will be praised and expounded and will become present in the community.

Introduction

The final sentence of Alistair Stewart-Sykes' landmark work on Melito of Sardis, *The Lamb's High Feast*, makes a bold claim: "*Peri Pascha*... may now be recognized as the most ancient Christian Liturgy known to us in completeness".¹ What is primarily bold about the claim is its significance. If *Peri Pascha* is our most ancient complete Christian liturgy then we would have a remarkable glimpse into early Christian worship, theology, and practice. For instance, we would have a full insight into how Christians in Asia celebrated Pascha, how they read and understood the Scriptures, how they understood

themselves in relation to the Jews and Jewish practices, how the role of prophet, bishop, and celebrant worked, how strong the Johannine influence was (as well as further insight into what exactly the Johannine tradition is in the first place). We would also have new questions to answer, such as how or if this liturgy is eucharistic, how Christ is made present in the community, what that presence means, how the Christians appropriated the Jewish seder rite, not to mention how the seder rite itself can be seen to have changed by Melito's time², and of course how this rite sheds light on Quartodeciman practice and beliefs in general. All of this, and much more, follow from Stewart-Sykes' claim. But, secondarily, what is bold about his claim is the resolution of it. Stewart-Sykes is not presenting the possibility that *Peri Pascha* is a complete liturgy, but the conclusion that it is so. We must remember here that *Peri Pascha* was only discovered, edited and printed sixty years ago by Campbell Bonner, who at the time considered the work "a fairly complete sermon"³. Clearly we have come a long way in sixty years, from considering it to be a sermon to a complete liturgy, and the claim that the latter has been proven as such. With the publication of *The Lamb's High Feast*⁴ in 1998 a kind of plateau was reached in scholarship on *Peri Pascha*; so much effort has been employed in just determining what the document is that very little has been done so far to assess the significance of the document for early Christian studies and liturgy. The general aim of this study is to begin that assessment. It would thus be prudent, having reached such a plateau, and taking our

¹ Alistair Stewart-Sykes, *The lamb's High Feast: Melito, Peri Pascha and the Quartodeciman Paschal Liturgy at Sardis* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 206

² Cf. Baruch M. Bokser, *The Origins of the Seder: The Passover Rite and Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California, 1984). Bokser sees Melito's seder as an important link in tracing the development of the Jewish seder after the fall of the Temple in 70 AD.

³ Campbell Bonner, *The Homily on the Passion by Melito Bishop of Sardis and Some Fragments of the Apocryphal Ezekiel* (London: Christophers, 1940).

⁴ See also Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha*, A. Stewart-Sykes trans. (Crestwood: SVSPress, 2001). The introduction reproduces Stewart-Sykes' claims in *The Lamb's High Feast*.

starting point from it, to look back upon the way we have come, the route we have taken. The purpose of this chapter therefore is a review of the claims of Stewart-Sykes and others about *Peri Pascha* and an examination of the evidence.

The Discovery Of Peri Pascha

In 1940 Bonner published a newly identified and translated “Homily *on the Passion* by Melito, Bishop of Sardis.” He had identified the work after study of a fourteen-leave papyrus codex which also contained, on the first six leaves, the last chapters of the book of Enoch.⁵ While the name *Meleiton* was found at the beginning of the work, the colophon was missing. Bonner established the identity of the work “by a sentence that Anastasius of Sinai quotes in a fragment⁶ among the Otto collection, *Corpus apologetarum christianorum*. Anastasius actually seems to have conflated two lines from PP 96 into one⁷, but the quote was close enough to the work before Bonner that he adopted the title given by Anastasius in his reference. Bonner also identified the work as a homily, a claim for which he had no more evidence than an assumption. In fact, noteworthy in his otherwise thorough introduction is the lack of any textual analysis of his assumption. He claims the homily “is what would today be called a Good Friday sermon,”⁸ while summarizing the contents therein and analyzing the many rhetorical flourishes employed by Melito, flourishes which, it is true, any homilist of Melito’s day

⁵ The papyrus leaves had been divided between two collections, with eight in the Chester-Beatty collection and six in that of the University of Michigan. Three fragments containing prophetic texts were among the papyri.

⁶ “Melito bishop of Sardis, from his work *On the Passion*: God has suffered by an Israelite right hand.” Cf. Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha and Fragments*, S.G. Hall, ed. and trans., (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 71.

⁷ Thus “God has been murdered. / The King if Israel has been destroyed by an Israelite right hand,” becomes, “God has suffered by an Israelite right hand.”

would have used. Unfortunately, Bonner's (understandable) assumption became received opinion about the text, and what would have been a significant find much earlier for the field of early Christian and liturgical history became another patristic homily from an obscure sect in Asia Minor holding forth a primitive and clumsy theology. As such, Bonner's homily *On the Passion* remained initially an obscure find.⁹

However, further discoveries of the text emerged, notably an almost complete Greek version in Papyrus Bodmer 13¹⁰, under the title, *Of Melito On Pascha*, and then a Coptic text perhaps from the third century.¹¹ What these discoveries produced was not only a proper title and a fuller and more reliable text, making *Peri Pascha* nearly a complete work, but they also precipitated further study of the work and the first indications that what was discovered might be more than a homily. To begin with, there is very little that is formally or functionally homiletic about *Peri Pascha*, despite the fact that it contains to a high degree many of the rhetorical devices employed by orators and therefore homilists of Melito's time and place. For instance, *Peri Pascha* analyzed in terms of a classical outline, in which the orator moves through a structure consisting of Propositio (Introduction), Narratio (Background), Probatio (Proof), and Peroratio (Summary). But such an outline does not serve the end that we would expect it to serve; namely, it does not seek to expound, explain, and apply the orator's topic or text in such a way as to be a moral lesson to his hearers. As Stewart-Sykes claims, "Melito in no part of

⁸ Bonner, *Homily*, 19.

⁹ Despite Bonner's own hopes: "The recovery of any fairly complete sermon delivered in the second century of our era would be an event of importance to students of the history of religion... Greater than ordinary interest is attached to the discovery of a homily by Melito, because it is certain that he was a highly respected leader of the church, although little is known of his life, and his writings have vanished except for scanty fragments" (*Homily*, 3).

¹⁰ M. Testuz, ed., *Papyrus Bodmer XIII, Meliton de Sardes Homelie sur la Paque* (Geneva: Bodmer, 1960).

¹¹ Cf. S.G. Hall, *Melito of Sardis, On Pascha*, xvii, n.8: "But experts to whom I have shown my photocopy... suggest the sixth, or at the earliest the fifth, century."

his work... draws out any moral lesson for his hearers".¹² Instead, we read highly charged passages of praise for God and His mighty works, so much so that Stewart-Sykes asks pertinently "whether a piece given over so entirely to the praises of God is a homily at all".¹³ Even the presence of such a high degree of rhetoric should arouse suspicion of the work as a homily. Melito, clearly trained in the Asiatic style of rhetoric, an even more florid branch of the so-called second sophistic school in the second century,¹⁴ employs so many stylistic devices that, were it intended to be a homily, it would be a poor one for being hardly distinguishable from a verse poem. With the presence of parallelism, word play, homoioteleuton, homoiarcton, metrical play, and so on, we are clearly closer to psalmody than homily. Moreover, each of the sections of the work's classical outline is demarcated by a doxology indicating at least some liturgical functionality in the text.

Arguments for the Homiletic Genre

There remain three options for ascribing a homiletic genre for *Peri Pascha*. The first is that Melito is functioning as a prophet in the community and so the work is in fact a prophetic homily. This explanation which would account for the work's highly charged rhetoric and hymnic quality. That Melito functioned as a prophet is more than plausible.¹⁵ Jerome, in a difficult passage, makes reference to Melito as having been "considered by

¹² Stewart Sykes, *Feast*, 70.

¹³ *Ibid*, 55.

¹⁴ See especially, Graham Anderson, *The Second Sophistic: A Cultural Phenomenon in the Roman Empire* (New York: Routledge, 1993); F. A. Wifstrand, "The Homily of Melito on the Passion," *Vigiliae Christianae*, 2 (1948), 201-23. See also, Stewart-Sykes, *On Pascha*, Introduction, 14-17.

¹⁵ Cf. Stewart-Sykes, *Feast*, 1.2.2, 13-14, where he discusses the issues surrounding Melito as a prophet of the Johannine tradition.

some of us to be a prophet,”¹⁶ a reference which led Stewart-Sykes to claim that “there is every indication here that Melito was considered a prophet by his contemporaries, and that this provides grounds for us to understand his work in this light”.¹⁷ What is more, the discovery of the text by Bonner, appended to the last chapters of the book of Enoch and accompanied by several prophetic/apocalyptic fragments, presents the strong possibility that its compiler considered the work itself and the author to be in the same prophetic line. However the question arises as to how a prophet would function in an early Christian community, an answer for which is as yet difficult to discern.¹⁸ Would he (or she) have been responsible for expounding the moral implications of a text? Or would he have served a liturgical function, a charismatic leader of a worshipping community, as *Peri Pascha* would indicate and Stewart-Sykes would claim. The issue is again a question of function: the function of prophecy is obviously distinct from that of homily, and any good rhetorician such as Melito would know that combining the two would create a work at cross purposes with itself.

The second argument for *Peri Pascha* being a homily is to see it as an example of a larger Johannine homiletic tradition. “If Melito’s tradition is Johannine,” says Stewart-Sykes, summing up this approach, “then a homily according to his understanding may be seen as being the same as that understood by John”.¹⁹ In other words, if Melito’s work is a homily, and if Melito is of the Johannine tradition, then we should be able to identify elements common to both authors. The problem with this position is the multiplication of

¹⁶ “...Tertullian complains at his elegant and declamatory genius, and adds that he is considered by some of us to be a prophet” (*From Jerome, On Famous Men, 24, Stewart-Sykes trans., On Pascha, 80*).

¹⁷ *On Pascha, 80*.

¹⁸ Cf. Gerald F. Hawthorne, “Christian Prophets and the Sayings of Jesus: Evidence and Criteria”, *SBL Seminar Papers*, v. 2 (Missoula: Scholars, 1975) 105-129. Hawthorne speaks in part about Melito as a prophet in the early tradition.

¹⁹ *Feast, 56*.

“ifs” needed to make the case, not least of which is the assumption that there are discernable homilies in John’s Gospel. Scholars such as Peder Borgen²⁰ would claim that “John shows awareness of the rabbinic synagogue homily, and that such is the rationale for the discourse of John 6”.²¹ However, so speculative are these assertions and so transient the scholarship that it would be unwise to base the identification of an entire document upon them. In addition, what has been said about the exegetical shape of the Johannine homily does not seem to match the shape of *Peri Pascha*.²² This fact leads Stewart-Sykes to conclude that “whatever *Peri Pascha* is, it is not an exegetical synagogue homily along rabbinic [or Johannine] lines”.²³ But as he further points out, “The consensus would seem to be that attempts to find synagogue homilies in the New Testament are anachronistic.”²⁴ The same anachronistic impulses might indeed drive the whole attempt to see *Peri Pascha* as a homily.²⁵ We assume a homily must exist at least somewhere in the liturgical shape of the second century. But that would be our assumption, perhaps based upon expectations deriving from our own *ordo* and that of the later patristic era. As Stewart-Sykes points out, “When commentators have referred to *Peri Pascha* as a homily they have intended something that would be recognized in the twentieth century; in so far as any type of *Peri Pascha* is a homily, it is not a type that would be recognized today.”²⁶ Besides, there is no reason to assume that a Christian celebration (a Passover celebration at that) would require a homily from anyone all the

²⁰ Peder Borgen, *Bread from Heaven: an Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo* (Leiden: Brill, 1965).

²¹ *Feast*, 56.

²² Cf. Stewart-Sykes, *Feast*, 3.1.1, for a detailed discussion.

²³ *Feast*, 60.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 57.

²⁵ A hint of which is perhaps found in Bonner’s claim, quoted above, that Melito’s work “is what would today be called a Good Friday sermon” (*Homily*, 19).

²⁶ *Feast*, 112.

time, and since there is no sustainable evidence that that is what we have in Melito, we have every reason to assume otherwise.

Identification as a Liturgical Document

However, it is in our third option for considering that *Peri Pascha* belongs to the genre of homily that we encounter a more realistic and viable reading of the text, and, as well, the first thorough study of the work as a Passover haggadah. Stuart G. Hall suggested the work be divided at Stanza 46,²⁷ with the first half being a homily on Exodus 12, and the second being the haggadah for the Passover table rite itself.²⁸ Hall's "ingenious solution", as described by Stewart-Sykes,²⁹ unlocked the mystery of the document as a whole. Taken as a whole, *Peri Pascha* as a homily did not make sense, and as a haggadah it did not fit with the mishnaic requirements. But divided at stanza 46, the pieces seem to fall into place on a number of levels. With its retelling of the story of Exodus 12, and then its description of how the Passover just retold is but a type, a model, for the more perfect Passover in Christ, the first part of *Peri Pascha* can more easily be understood as a homily in itself, perhaps, as Hall suggested, presented the previous week in accompaniment with the reading. The second part, suddenly takes on the pattern of the seder with the Mishnaic requirements for the accompanying haggadah. Stewart-Sykes, however, while benefiting greatly from Hall's division, rejects at least half of Hall's conclusions, "namely that the first half [of *Peri Pascha*] is a synagogal exposition of

²⁷ The first lines being, "You have heard the account of the model and what corresponds to it; / listen also to the constitution of the mystery" (46.301-302).

²⁸ S.G. Hall, "Melito in the Light of the Passover Haggadah", *JTS* (ns) 22 (1971) 29-46. See specifically pp. 36-37 for Hall's argument for the division at stanza 46.

Exodus 12.”³⁰ He rejects Hall’s conclusion for three reasons. First, “it would be stretching the memories of the hearers somewhat to expect them to recall the previous Sabbath in such detail.”³¹ Similarly, “the absence of an indication of time [at *PP* 46] makes it all the more probable that there had been no time lapse between the two halves.” The second reason for rejecting Hall’s conclusion lies in the fact that “*Peri Pascha* does, after all, satisfy the conditions for a single piece of declamation.” There is no internal evidence to suggest that these halves are two separate works delivered at separate times. And third, returning to the arguments leveled at the notion of the work being a homily as a whole, “*PP*1-46 simply does not correspond to the shape of a synagogue homily.” Stewart-Sykes’ improvement upon Hall’s work was, as we shall see, to suggest, with extensive supporting evidence, that “among Christians the reading and exposition of Passover Torah was a part of the Passover Eve celebration.” In other words, the first half was an epideictic exposition on Exodus 12 delivered during the vigil and vitally preparing for the celebration embodied by the second half of *Peri Pascha*. It is to Stewart-Sykes’ identification that we will now turn.

Following the division of Hall and others of *Peri Pascha* at stanza 46, Stewart-Sykes follows Hall’s description of the first half being the teaching and praises which would follow the reading of Exodus 12. But, for the reasons stated above, Stewart-Sykes cannot accept that such a teaching and reading would occur earlier in the week, but in fact occurred during the vigil after sundown on the fourteenth Nissan. This would demand from the first half a liturgical function, since such a homily delivered at the vigil before the celebration would have to prepare people for that celebration. Stewart-Sykes

²⁹ *Feast*, 62.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 121.

spends some time trying to identify how this might be evidenced in the text, a summary of which is provided below:

- a) *diatribe* - which he feels is impossible to reconcile text with form³²;
- b) *epideixis* – this form is present, but in service of the haggadic aim of the whole;³³
- c) *rhetorical history* – *Peri Pascha* is definitely rhetorical history, but it is transformed from history to anamnesis;³⁴
- d) *allegory* – far more a typological work than allegorical;³⁵
- e) *targum* – *Peri Pascha*, he writes, “may demonstrate a knowledge of targumic traditions and share a method of exegesis based on the expansion of the text, but is not a targum in form;³⁶
- f) *liturgical hymn* – The whole of *Peri Pascha*, he explains, is not so, but definitely shares elements of the form;³⁷
- g) *midrash* – a good description of the first half, but not on its own sufficient.³⁸

The result is that he views the first half as being “a rhetorical historical *diegma*, with a digression, and simultaneously as a historical haggadah.”³⁹ In other words, Stewart-Sykes finds that the first half is a composite of forms arising from but not being identified as a targumic form.

With regards to the second half, Stewart-Sykes follows and validates the work of Hall and Cross in seeing it as the text of a Quartodeciman Paschal haggadah. He outlines four major internal clues for this identification (as well as numerous minor ones beyond our scope in this chapter):

³¹ *Feast*, 122, and so until the end of the paragraph.

³² *Ibid*, 62-72.

³³ *Ibid*, 72-77.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 77-83.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 84-92.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 92-100.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 100-104.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 104-112.

1. “There is a close verbal correspondence between *Mishnah Pesahim* 10.5, which appears in the haggadah, and PP 68.”⁴⁰ This correspondence may be outlined this way:

MP 10.5

He brought us out

from bondage to freedom

from sorrow to gladness

and from mourning to a festival day

and from darkness

to a great light

and from tyranny

to redemption

PERI PASCHA 68

It is he who rescued us (ουτοϋ εϣτι
ο(ρ(ϣαμενοϋ η(ηαϋ)

from bondage to freedom (ε(ϋ

doul eiav eiϋ eDeuqeriaη)

from death to life (ε(ϋqana/του eiϋ
zwhh)

from darkness (ε(ϋsko/του)

to light (eiϋ fww)

and from servitude (ε(ϋ turanni/lov)

to an eternal Kingdom (eiϋ

basil eian aiϋhion)

2. “The set themes which, according to Rabbi Gamaliel in the Mishna are to be covered in the haggadah are all covered by *Peri Pascha*, namely the lamb, the deliverance from Egypt, the bitter herbs and the unleavened bread.”⁴¹
3. “There is the use of the term ‘aphikomenos’ of Christ at *Peri Pascha* 66 and 86.”⁴² The aphikomen piece of bread, which was broken off from the main bread at the beginning of the table rite, and revealed at the end as a symbol of the coming Messiah, is a vital part of the Jewish Passover seder.⁴³

³⁹ *Ibid*, 113.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 68.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 61.

⁴² *Ibid*, 62.

⁴³ For this Cf. *Mishna Pesahim* 10:8; Cf. David Daube, *He that Cometh*, (London: Diocese of London, 1966); and Bokser, *Origins of the Seder*, 65.

4. “We must notice the links between *Peri Pascha* and the *dayyenu*... In particular we may note the close linking of the exodus and the giving of the manna, and the prose conclusion to the catalogue of benefits.”⁴⁴

Also significant is the fact that the prescribed shape of the haggadah, as outlined by *Mishna Pesahim*, must ‘begin with the disgrace and end with the glory’, and this is the precise shape to be found within the second part of *Peri Pascha*. In addition, Melito’s haggadah contains the requisite questions (in the Jewish rite asked by the children) at roughly the requisite places in the seder. Stewart-Sykes outlines many other concurrences between the rites outlined in the *Mishna Pesahim* and that visible in *Peri Pascha*, and concludes that “Melito’s version of the haggadah is sufficiently close to that of the Jews to make it a reasonable assumption that the table context remained, as did the motivation for the haggadah, in Melito’s tradition.”⁴⁵ The parallels exist on a theological level as well. Melito expounds upon Christ the Paschal lamb at the point in the Jewish rite that the paschal lamb would be consumed (in the Temple period) or commemorated in the meal (after the Temple was destroyed) (PP 67ff). Even the liturgical act which is fundamental to Melito’s work, remembrance / anamnesis, in which Christ comes to be present in the community, is central to that which was fundamental to the Jewish seder. As Stewart-Sykes points out, “On this basis we may equally suggest that *Peri Pascha* and the haggadah are functionally comparable. Clearly they are not identical in the different mysteries which are being commemorated, but they may be compared on the basis that both intend to commemorate what, in different ways, are paschal mysteries.”⁴⁶ Thus, in

⁴⁴ *Feast*, 62.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 65.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 50.

both form and function, *Peri Pascha* is a Christian haggadah with the rubrics for the seder (which we could not expect to find anyways) missing, but embedded in the form.

However, what helps to make *Peri Pascha* such a complex document is that this post-vigil haggadah homily⁴⁷ and Jewish Christian haggadah are combined with a high degree of Hellenistic rhetoric, as observed earlier. The work must therefore be understood and divided at a number of different levels and in a number of different ways, with the rhetorical forms always working to accomplish the liturgical function.⁴⁸ Indeed, this presence of two modes of expression working together to unite a worshiping community in Christ in celebration of his Passover is another fascinating contribution of the work to early Christian studies, for it represents perhaps one of the earliest examples of Christians using all the tools available to them in their Hellenistic context within their Jewish background and framework.

It has been shown from the above that whatever else *Peri Pascha* may be, it simply is not a homily, as we might understand a homily. However, the evidence both within the text and without (though to a lesser degree) points to a division in the work at PP 46, the first half being a haggadic homily during the vigil and the second being the haggadah of the seder itself, and Stewart-Sykes shows how many different influences, both Jewish and Hellenist, formed the whole. Stewart-Sykes' contribution to this conclusion (built heavily upon that of many others, to be sure) cannot be underestimated, for his study is indeed far-reaching and exhaustive on most subjects touching on *Peri Pascha*. For this reason he can be justified in the boldness of his claim that the work is

⁴⁷ Cf. Stewart-Sykes, *Feast*, 112: "Our understanding of what it might mean to call this half of *Peri Pascha* a homily is greatly increased. It is most particularly a haggadic homily, and not expository, and is liturgical to a higher degree than an expository homily..."

⁴⁸ See the appended table below.

definitely “the most ancient Christian liturgy known to us in completeness.” But due to the concentration of his work on establishing that conclusion, many questions remain open for study. In a very real sense, *Peri Pascha* has been discovered twice, the first time as a text, and now as a liturgical text with profound implications. It is to these implications that our work must now be directed, knowing in T.S. Eliot’s phrase that ‘if we can see so far, it is because we stand on the shoulders of giants.’

‘THE ANCIENT LAW, OR RATHER, THE RECENT WORD’ – ANAMNESIS IN PERI PASCHA

*Several men were sitting at the front of the room, waiting just like Antonia. One of them stood up, nodded to a younger man a few feet away who then promptly walks over to retrieve a lamp across the room. Everyone now stood up, while the two men met at the center and at the front, one holding the lamp and the other, the older one, distinguished looking and wearing a garment of finer than usual fabric, now holding a beautifully decorated scroll. Antonia knew this man well of course. His name was Marcus. He owned the house that this gathering was taking place in, and was this community’s wealthiest member and largest benefactor. Marcus, she had recently learned, was also of actual Roman citizenship, having also been born and educated in Rome, where, apparently, his great grandfather on his mother’s side had been converted by Paul of Tarsus himself. Consequently, when Marcus moved to Sardis in an effort to establish a strategic outpost of his fathers eastern trading business, he brought with him an excellent copy of one of Paul’s famous letters to Rome. She had heard it read at the meals a couple of times in the last few years. He had also brought with him a copy of Matthew’s witness, and even helped pay for the restoration Peter’s and John’s. Marcus and the other man bowed to the other gentlemen at the front of the room, and then Marcus began reading. Antonia knew right away what was being read; she had waited all year for this reading, anticipating it greatly. She felt the darkness about her more keenly now and she collected herself and focused her attention on what was being read from the ornately decorated scroll, its tan skin softly illumined by the lamp next to it. “Then the LORD said to Moses...” *Passover, she thought, this is the Passover!**

Christ Present in the Community

The most dramatic and important moment of *Peri Pascha* occurs at the end and plays a crucial role in understanding the whole work. Melito has spent ninety-nine stanzas carefully building towards this climax. Having expounded on the Exodus event, revealed the presence of Christ in the Passover, explained the relationship of the Scriptural type and antitype, and described Israel’s hardness of heart and the death of the Christ as the true slain lamb of the true Passover, Melito finally breaks into the fully prophetic mode in which Christ speaks through him in the first person:

“Who takes issue with me? Let him stand against me.
 I released the condemned.
 I brought the dead to life.
 I raise up the buried.
 Who is there that contradicts me?”

“I am the one,” says the Christ,
 “I am the who that destroyed death,
 and triumphed over the enemy,
 and trod down Hades,
 and bound the strong one,
 and carried off man to the heights of heaven.
 I am the one,” says the Christ. (101-102.748-765)¹

This triumphant declaration of Christ through the mouth of the prophet recounting his great deeds, is followed by nine statements of self-definition:

For I am your forgiveness,
 I am the Pascha of salvation,
 I am the lamb slain for you;
 I am your ransom,
 I am your life,
 I am your light,
 I am your salvation
 I am your resurrection,
 I am your King. (103.769-777)

This nine-fold proclamation is deeply reminiscent of the Johannine “I am” sayings, and no doubt reflects the essential influence of Johannine Christianity on Melito and on

¹ All quotations and references, in Greek and English, of *Peri Pascha* are from Hall, unless otherwise noted. Stewart-Sykes’ recently published *On Pascha* (Crestwood: SVSPress, 2000) is also excellent, offering an accurate and fluent translation, with an introduction and textual notes which reflect the best in Melito scholarship.

second century Asia Minor in general.² However, through Melito's use of the emphatic $\epsilon\theta\omega\ \gamma\alpha\theta\ \epsilon\iota\theta\iota$ at line 769, from which the rest of the *ego* statements are derived, we may see further than this. Clearly reflected in this line is Jesus' statement in John 8:58, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am [$\epsilon\theta\omega\ \epsilon\iota\theta\iota$]", and the revelation of the divine name in Exodus 3:14, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" What the speaker is saying here is brilliantly recapitulative and represents the moment of total revelation on every level that *Peri Pascha* is working on, namely that the God who revealed himself to Moses, and led Israel to freedom through the slain lamb, has revealed himself to the community of Sardis and has led them to freedom by the slain lamb which is the Christ. What is more, just as God spoke and worked through Moses, so He speaks and works through Melito. The "I am" statements which follow from this are elaborations, or further revelations, of the identity of Israel, old and new, and may be found similarly stated throughout the Scriptures, most specifically in John's Gospel. On the intratextual level, as well, these climactic stanzas tie up the many themes of *Peri Pascha*, so that "I am your forgiveness, / I am the Pascha of salvation" (103.769-770) resolves, as Thomas Halton points out, "the two-fold theme announced at the beginning" (1.6ff)³, and "I am your life" (103.773) recapitulates the Paschal lamb that brought life to Israel (31.201ff), "the life which Adam's fall had taken away from his children (49.330ff), the life which Moses foretold to deaf ears (61.426ff), and which the Jews had rejected (90.659)."⁴ The whole of this prophetic declaration is also masterfully pitched to an exultant pathos, not only by a weaving together (in a very short passage) of multiple

² Cf. Stewart-Sykes, *Feast*, 1.2.1.

³ Thomas Halton, "Stylistic device in Melito Peri Pascha," in *Kyriakon: Festschrift Johannes Quasten*, ed. Patrick Granfield and Josef A. Jungmann (Munster: Aschendorff, 1970), 249-55, 255

⁴ Halton, 255

rhetorical devices,⁵ but also by an introduction which employs a sentence structure in which subject and verb are separated by five tersely worded epitomes of salvation history, so that speaker and hearer are rhetorically launched into the Christ's speech:

The Lord, when he had clothed himself with man
and suffered because of him that was suffering,
and been bound because of him that was held fast,
and been judged because of him that was condemned,
and been buried because of him that was buried,
Arose from the dead and uttered this cry... (100-101.748-753)

Clearly, therefore, stanzas 99 through 103 are rhetorically and thematically the climax of the Sardis rite. But what is that climax? What is enshrined, expressed, communicated, celebrated in these stanzas? The answer can be best understood by an examination of the function of Paschal observance as Melito would have known it, and how his haggadah accomplishes that function.

Remembrance / Anamnesis

The haggadah is the ritual observance of the biblical injunction to the Israelites to *remember* the Passover of the Lord. Thus, Exodus 12.14 states: "This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as an ordinance forever." The centrality of this feast to the Jewish identity can almost not be overstated, since the event itself that it

⁵ Cf. Halton, "Christ's speech is vivid prosopoiia, and exploits many devices: rhetorical question recalling the opening gambit of the terrified first-born, epanaphora, antonomasia, a perfect parison and homoiteleton," 255

commemorates was the defining moment in the formation of the Jewish nation and was increasingly interpreted as such in subsequent generations. Israel had been claimed by God and delivered from bondage to an eternal freedom, and by doing this, God had created a nation from a tribe, and an exalted people from a slave caste. However, this entire identity of the Jewish people rested entirely on a past event, and so the relationship of past and present had to be bridged, and was so, by an understanding of remembrance as making present an eternal action. Remembrance, therefore, cannot be understood as simply memory, however significant that memory may be; one cannot have a memory of an event that they had not been alive to witness. Rather, remembrance prescribed in Scripture and employed in paschal observance can best be understood as the present participation in an event which has no relationship to time, but which is eternally formative.⁶ The fact that the Passover happened in the past was irrelevant, since that event was a memorialized revelation of how God always deals with his people. To remember is to act, as God's given name to Moses in Exodus 4.15 suggests, and as God displays in Numbers 10.9, and therefore to remember God is to remember how he is acting now. Remembrance of the Passover is thus participation in and recognition of the ongoing *paschal* relationship of God with his elect. Thus the Passover becomes the principle for the development of Jewish nationhood and is returned to again and again by subsequent generations trying to understand their current historical situation. Every battle becomes a battle with Pharaoh, the exile in Babylon becomes an enslavement under Egypt from which God will free his people, and prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel can refer

⁶ Cf. Ruth G. Fredman, *The Passover Seder*, (Scarborough, Ontario: Meridian, 1983); Carmine Di Sante, *Jewish Prayer: The Origins of the Christian Liturgy*, (New Jersey: paulist Press, 1985); Geoffery Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology*, (London: Epworth Press, 1973), 64-68; Xavier Leon-Dufour,

to God's mercy on the enslaved Israel as a reason that Israel should repent and be reconciled with their deliverer. But this can only be the case if biblical remembrance is understood more as revelation and not mere memory, and the function of the yearly Paschal observance was exactly to remember in this way.

The haggadah of that observance is the ritual means by which each generation remembered the Passover. A haggadah can most simply be understood as the literary work setting out the text of the seder or table rite⁷; it is the text of the liturgy, the words which accompany the ritual. Much has been written exploring the origins of the haggadah and seder. The history of both is long and complex, since the observance itself stretches back through millennia, through upheaval and change, and has been subject to cultural influence along the way, most notably from the Greco-Roman symposium customs of the first three centuries AD. Crucial, of course, to the development of the modern haggadah was the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD which forced the issue of what to do at Passover without the sacrificial lamb offered at the Temple. The solution, arrived at roughly through the formation of the Mishnaic laws in the second century,⁸ was a shift to the diaspora and domestic rite and a greater emphasis upon the bitter herbs and unleavened bread of the seder. In other words, the centrality of the lamb in the meal, as the memorial of the means of the Passover, is replaced by necessity by the peripheral elements of the meal, elements which conveyed instead the experience of the event, such as being in great haste (bread) and having been embittered by slavery (bitter herbs). One thing is clear, however: the haggadic function remained the same, even if the ritual

Sharing the Eucharistic Bread, (New Jersey: Paulist Press), 82-102; Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, (Crestwood: SVSPress, 1987), 191-213.

⁷ Thus Bokser, *Origins of the Seder*, 144.

emphasis shifted. On the first night of the Passover, the fourteenth of the month of Nissan, the Jewish people would prepare a meal in accordance to the Scriptural and mishnaic injunctions. They would hear the appropriate readings at the synagogue, and then would sit down to a ritualized dinner built around four essential questions which are meant to evoke a re-telling and therefore re-enactment of the original Passover meal. Through this ritual, involving foods – bitter herbs, unleavened bread, wine, egg, greens, etc. – and hymns, prayers and blessings, narration and dramatization, the Passover is remembered and the people of God again are delivered and their enemies again overthrown, at least in anticipation. The chosen are re-chosen, the free are again made free. Such, anyways, would have been in outline and function the ritual known in the Sardis of Melito's day.

Melito's Paschal Haggadah

But what can we say about Melito's haggadah? Would he have inherited the same ritual, and if so how would he have adapted it? Certainly the first Christians continued the celebration of the Passover, but just as surely they would have had to adapt that part of the ritual which dealt with the sacrificial lamb, since Christ was understood to have taken that role forever. Similar to the haggadic origins in general, much has been written exploring the last meal of Jesus with his disciples recorded in the Gospels and what that may reveal to us about Paschal observance of the Christians at that time.⁹ For instance, it

⁸ Specifically Mishnah Pesahim 10; Cf. Bokser, *Origins of the Seder*, "The Mishnah's response: The meaning of Passover continues without the Passover sacrifice", 37-49

⁹ An excellent summary of scholarship in this field, as well as a good contribution to it in itself, may be found in Jerome Kodell, *The Eucharist in The New Testament*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1988), esp.

seems that the Synoptic Gospels make the meal a Passover meal, held on the first night of Passover and thus describe “a record of the *Seder* of the first night.”¹⁰ However, in John’s Gospel the Last Supper is held the night before, since he seemingly records Jesus’ crucifixion as being on the first night of Passover itself. “The Last Supper, according to John,” summarizes Zeitlin, “was on Thursday night, the 13th of the month, and Jesus was arrested and crucified the following morning Friday, the 14th, a day before Passover.”¹¹ Melito, a bishop of the church in Sardis in Asia minor, certainly worked from the Johannine chronology.¹² This is significant for several reasons. First, it would account for why there is no distinct reference to an institution narrative. Melito, taking his cue from John’s Gospel, simply does not directly link the Last Supper with the Passover meal, the latter being the feast with which *Peri Pascha* is connected. Second, and more significantly, it would help us understand why his haggadah works so hard to link the slaughter of the lamb with the crucifixion of Christ, since in John’s chronology the two coincide. Melito is not celebrating a Passover according to the rite instituted by Christ (seemingly in John’s Gospel) the night before Passover; rather, his rite assumes the paschal shape and purpose, but its content has been radically altered to reflect the revelation of the Messianic Passover. How exactly his haggadah reflects that revelation will in part be the subject of the next chapter.

22-37; see also, Etienne Trocme, *The Passion as Liturgy: A Study in the Origin of the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

¹⁰ Solomon Zeitlin, “The Liturgy of the First Night of Passover”. (Jewish Quarterly Review, 1948, 431-460), 444.

¹¹ Zeitlin, 445.

¹² Cf. C.C. Richardson, “Quartodecimans and The Synoptic Chronology”, (Harvard Theological Review, xxxiii, 1940), 177. For introductions to Johannine theology and tradition see, Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, (ETR) (London: SCM, 1989); J.K. Howard, “Passover and Eucharist in the Fourth Gospel”, (SJT, 20, 1967), 329-337.

Presently, however, we need now to return to the question asked above about what exactly is happening in the climax of *Peri Pascha*? We have seen how the function of the paschal tradition inherited by Melito is primarily one of remembrance and how that remembrance is the participation in and recognition of the ever present and ever active paschal reality. We have seen how this function is accomplished in Melito's context through a ritual meal which re-enacts the paschal event by a literary work consisting of exposition, exhortation, prayer and doxology. What we can see now, then, in the climax of stanzas 99 through 103, is the result to which this ritual of remembrance has been building. The Passover has been described and explained, the mystery of Christ has been revealed and shown to be the reality of the paschal type, and then the death of the true lamb, the perfect and eternal Passover, has been remembered, so that now the community stands fully present to the reality of the Messianic Passover. They are present to Christ and Christ is present to them, so much so that Melito breaks into the prophetic first person. He is no longer speaking on behalf of God, he is speaking *as God*. As Stewart-Sykes notes on this part of *Peri Pascha*, "In this rhetorical climax we may see Melito functioning as a prophet by speaking the words of the present and risen Christ, speaking to his people in the assembly, present in his spirit as through the sacramental actions of the Pascha."¹³ Thus the great "I am" statements are not accidentally in the present active voice, nor are they rhetorically representative of what Christ *would* say either; rather they are expressive of the current reality and the actual qualities of the sacramental union of Christ and community. Christ *is* forgiveness, so that we might say he *is being* forgiveness, he *is being* salvation, ransom, life, light, resurrection, and king for the people gathered and formed in him through the paschal haggadah led by Melito. Also, the high

¹³ *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha*, Stewart-Sykes trans. (SVS, 2001). p. 66, n. 38.

degree of intertextual closure in these few stanzas arises from the fact of Christ's realized presence in the community as fulfilling not only the many scriptural types outlined by Melito, but also the many thematic strains within *Peri Pascha* itself. Simply summarized, Christ the true Passover has been revealed and realized – the feast whose function was to remember the acts of God, making Him presently active among them, has been fulfilled.

The Aphikomen Piece

But an important question arises here as to whether the fulfillment of the feast has been realized only through the inspired prophetic mode of Melito, or whether by another means as well. The answer lies in the fact that Melito's prophetic speech mode does not occur within a vacuum, but as we have seen through a ritualized meal. What we would expect, therefore, is his climactic speech to have coincided with some element of the meal itself, and indeed there is some substantial evidence, both textual and contextual, that it did so. In 1925 and 1926, a scholar and acclaimed madman – “he was both”¹⁴ – Robert Eisler broke new ground in the search for the origins of the Jewish and Christian Passover. Eisler was a New Testament scholar with little knowledge of ancient Jewish and Christian liturgical development, and as a result many of his arguments suffer from anachronism. His primary thesis was that the ceremonial *aphikomen* piece of bread in the Jewish Passover meal, which is hidden at the beginning of the meal and revealed and then consumed at the end, parallels the Christian body of Christ, the host. The reaction his thesis provoked was extreme. Prominent Jewish (A. Marmorstein) and Christian (Hans Lietzmann) scholars published vehement attacks of Eisler, and then galvanized their

respective communities to exclude Eisler. Eisler was denied even the opportunity to publish his response to the wave of attacks, and after attorneys were hired and lawsuits threatened, he eventually backed down and remained isolated and silent on the matter. What Eisler had noticed was that the *aphikomen* piece was fundamentally messianic, in that the broken off piece of bread is the Messiah broken off “of the Jewish people, existing but as yet concealed, and his coming at the end of this Passover supper will make the people complete, whole.”¹⁵ Eisler, it must be said, did not present his argument convincingly, and he did leave himself open to attack, but he could not have imagined so forceful a reaction. Scholarship in either faith community was not prepared at the time to accept the possibility of so close a liturgical connection, and to suggest that the current Christian rite would represent a more ancient Jewish rite was unthinkable, since the corollary of that argument would be that the Christian takeover of the central Jewish feast meant change on the Jewish side and not, as usually thought, on the Christian side.

Eisler’s thesis remained ignored until in 1966, when David Daube in a lecture in St. Paul’s Cathedral, London, took up his cause. Daube corrected much of the anachronism in Eisler’s argument and furthered his thesis significantly, though his findings were not widely published. The thesis hinges on etymology, and Daube’s rendering of it should be quoted here in full:

In the course of the Jewish Passover eve service, then, whether at the conclusion of the supper (the practice which has carried the day) or at its commencement (as according to some Talmudic practice at least), a piece of unleavened bread is taken as the Messiah by the company. The traditional designation of this fragment is Aphiqoman. The word is neither Hebrew or Aramaic. Medieval Jewish scholars give fanciful etymologies. Modern scholars realize that the word is Greek, yet for

¹⁴ David Daube, *He that Cometh*, 6

once their etymologies are even more whimsical than those of the Rabbis. They do not even disdain made-up formations for which there is no evidence whatever in the whole of Greek Literature. Lietzmann, in his article putting down Eisler, improving upon an idea of Jastrows, claims that the words stands for *epi komen*, in German *auf den Bummel!*, ‘off to a crawl!’. Eisler, however, was right: “Aphiqoman is the Greek *aphikomenos* or *ephikomenos*, ‘The Coming One’. ‘He that Cometh’, Hebrew *habba*’, Aramaic *’athe*. But for the theological and historical consequences that follow, it is hard to believe that this obvious, philologically easiest, *naheliegendste* derivation would have been overlooked in favour of more far-fetched, tortured ones.¹⁶

In other words, embedded in the Jewish Passover rite is a messianic hope, and the novelty of the Christians, in Daube’s words, “was the application to the situation, the identification of the bread [ascribed to the Messiah, the Coming One] with Jesus.”¹⁷ The result of this early identification, and other similar identifications by Christians, was that the trend of the Jewish Passover eve service, especially when it was reformed in the centuries following the loss of the Temple, was “towards dissociation from what Christianity made of it. Christian potentialities were suppressed.”¹⁸ The animosity of early modern Jewish and Christian scholars towards such a thesis, however well supported, is easy to understand. Daube’s version of Eisler, however, won acceptance, though the thesis thus presented, and its enormous potentialities, remains largely unexplored.

One of these potentialities has in fact been realized in the discovery of the connection between the *aphikomen* piece in the Passover seder and the use of the term *aphikomenos* by Melito in two places (stanzas 66 and 86) in *Peri Pascha*. The connection

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 6

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 8

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 13

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 12

was first made most publicly, though only in passing, by Hall in his introduction to the standard edition of the work.¹⁹ Stewart-Sykes, following Hall, has carried the connection to its logical conclusion within Melito's rite. "What we are claiming," writes Stewart-Sykes, "is that Melito understood the messianic significance of the *aphikomenos*, and that this ritual was part of his paschal tradition."²⁰ How could this ritual be understood to work within Melito's seder? The *aphikomen* piece would have been hidden at the beginning of the meal proper (textually represented by stanzas 46 through 65), during which time is "delivered the first substructure of the haggadah", and then revealed (according to Passover custom) at the end of meal with the words, οὐτος ἀφικόμενος ἐστὶν οὐρανῶν (66.451), when Melito "begins the second substructure by revealing the Messiah."²¹ The bread is passed out and eaten during the highly poetic and therefore deeply sacramental section of the haggadah, represented by stanzas 66 through to the end. The identification of this messianic bread to Christ Jesus as the triumphant conclusion to the rite, represents a significant development by the Christians in what would have been a minor part of the Passover rite in general. Commenting on the significance of this bread to the early Christians of Melito's community, Stewart-Sykes writes,

"it is the bread of life, the messianic bread of which *John 6* speaks; it is by virtue of the rite of *aphikomen* that the bread of life becomes a subject of pre-Passover teaching in the Johannine church. This ritual forms the first part of the *mnimosinon*, the summary of the haggadah and the commemorative intent of the seder. In this act Christ is present."²²

¹⁹ Hall, *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha and Fragments*, xxvii and 35. Cf. also Hall, "Melito in the Light of the Passover Haggadah," 29-46.

²⁰ *Feast*, 198.

²¹ *Ibid*, 198.

²² *Ibid*, 198.

Indeed, we can see how much Christ is present in Melito's climatic speech at the end of the rite, after the Christians have eaten the bread ascribed to Christ and are now fully united, body and soul, with their redeemer.

Thus the Passover celebration whose function was to remember the works of God in such a manner that God and community might be united in the ongoing reality and power of those events has been accomplished in two ways. First by the ritual exposition of those events and second by the eating of the *aphikomen* piece in conjunction with that exposition. However, the whole of this ritual depends on a successful exegesis of the Scriptures in which Christ is related to the Scriptures, the Scriptures to Christ, and both are related to the paschal participants in such a way as to effect the anamnestic function of the feast. This is no small task, and Melito's attempt will be the subject of the next chapter where we will see a biblical exegesis which is fundamentally anamnestic and eucharistic in nature.

‘THE FORCE OF THE MYSTERY’ – MELITO'S EXEGESIS

When Marcus finished the reading, he and the lamp-bearer stepped to the side of the room where the scroll was placed back upon the a rack and the lamp placed on a table. A long pause ensued. Antonia noticed one of the Elders from the front of the room sit down upon a couch, and the arrange his robes. He looked around intently. Of course, she knew exactly who this was. He had been her guide, her teacher in the Faith, with whom she had spent many hours discussing the Law and the Christ – he was Melito, overseer of her community. “The Scripture from the Hebrew Exodus has been read” he began, slowly, “and the words of the mystery have been plainly stated...” She listened carefully, wondering sometimes what her brother or mother might think if they knew, really knew like she did, that “the slaying of the sheep and the distribution of the blood and the scripture from the law have reached as far as Christ.” Then Melito began telling the story. She became entranced – the slain sheep, the angel bringing death to the first born, but sparing the initiated, the guarded, the illumined even while the dead first born danced into oblivion to the very beat their mother’s wailing. She thought that she could feel death in this very room she was in, lurking in the darkness around her, just as Melito was describing. She was the first born, she thought, and began reminding herself that she had been initiated too, illumined and guarded. Just then Melito began explaining the mystery of the sheep, of death, of the Passover. Glory to God, she thought, and then everyone around her burst into a song she knew well.

The Exegetical Quantum Leap

There is in *Peri Pascha* what can only be described as an exegetical quantum leap. Somehow we go from a vigil reading of Exodus to the prophetic proclamation of the risen Christ himself, without, we must add, the use of a mediary Gospel. What in effect we are dealing with in *Peri Pascha* is an exegesis which is still primarily kerygmatic. Melito does not cite a Gospel, or an Epistle, or refer to any of the Apostles by name; there is no external intermediary referent, no canonized text by which he exegetes Scripture. Certainly by necessity he is influenced by the kerygmatic traditions, specifically those of Johannine and Petrine origin, which would become the Gospels, and he may have even possessed one or more of these Gospels in written form; but he is still working within an

essentially pre-textual, pre-canonical tradition. A “New Testament” and an “Old Testament” did not exist as categories in his mind; the former, though written, were not yet universally accepted, canonically established, or even possessed in entirety by all the churches,¹ and the latter were simply not “Old” yet at all. Instead, Scripture for Melito was the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets, which together formed the *essential* witness to the truth of the Gospel. As John Behr notes, “the object is not to understand the “original meaning” of an ancient text, as in modern historical-critical scholarship, but to understand Christ, who, by being explained “according to Scriptures,” becomes the sole subject of Scripture throughout.”² Thus, when Melito and his community read from Exodus during their Vigil, they are reading it as the *primary* text, as the foundational tradition, the canonical witness to Christ, existing to clarify the proclaimed Gospel, and not the other way around. For them, Exodus was their text, not one borrowed from the Jews, and the Passover described therein had no other meaning than the one which they gathered to celebrate. In the succinct phrase of Karl Gerlach, “Pascha is the Christ, and Exodus 12 is a gospel.”³ This means that Melito stands at the end of, but still firmly within, the early apostolic, kerygmatic tradition, in which he is primarily a prophetic exegete of the Scriptures through a still oral witness to Christ, and *Peri Pascha*, though not Apostolic in origin, can be considered a kind of Gospel in its own right. With this in mind, then, how does he make the leap from Exodus to Christ present, from Passover in Egypt to Passover in Sardis, from a description of the lamb slain to the eating of the lamb slain? This chapter is all about that quantum leap.

¹ Cf. B. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: It's Origin, Development and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) Appendix on “canon”.

² John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea: The Formation of Christian Theology, V.1* (Crestwood: SVSPress, 2001).

³ Karl Gerlach, *The Antenicene Pascha: A Rhetorical History* (Uitgeverij Peeters, Belgium:1998), 78.

Melito and History

First, however, some preliminary notes regarding Melito's understanding of History and Scripture are in order. Two years after Stewart-Sykes wrote *The Lamb's High Feast*, Henry Knapp published an article with the promising title, 'Melito's Use of Scripture in *Peri Pascha*: Second Century Typology'.⁴ In attempting to explore Melito's use of typology, Knapp distinguishes between the allegorical and the typological mode, the former being "the exposition of hidden meanings, heavenly realities symbolized by earthly realities," and the latter being "the search for correspondence between events, persons, or things within the historical framework of revelation."⁵ The word 'historical' here is loaded, however, since it would not strictly have to be included in a definition of typology – one could just as easily say 'within the *received* framework of salvation'. But Knapp includes it because he understands Melito's exegesis to be *fundamentally* historical, or more precisely, literal-historical. It is true that Melito's dependence upon the events described in Exodus is a historical dependence, in that a type must exist for the

⁴ Henry Knapp, "Melito's Use of Scripture in *Peri Pascha*: Second Century Typology," *Vigiliae Christianae*, v. 54, pt. 4, (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 343-374. In fairness to Knapp, his study of Melito's typology was thorough and illuminating, providing a good background to the subject. But he missed the mark, and spun off into an unfortunate trajectory, with one sentence. "Although there are indeed identifiable parallels with the Mishnah's instructions concerning the observance of the Passover Haggadah (e.g., *Pesachim* x.4-5)," Knapp concedes, "the unity of the document appears to be hermeneutically necessary for Melito's purpose and the traditional understanding of the treatise as a homily will be assumed here."⁴ What is first of all unfortunate about his decision to treat *Peri Pascha* as a homily is it seems to be made in face of all evidence to the contrary. He does cite Hall's work pointing to *Peri Pascha*'s haggadic function, but without stating why he just as easily dismisses it; more surprisingly, for an article on Melito published in 2000, a good year and a half after *Vigiliae Christianae* itself published Stewart-Sykes' *Lamb's High Feast*, Knapp makes no reference at all to Stewart-Sykes' landmark work, which would have put the possibility of discussing *Peri Pascha* as a homily out of question. But what is most of all unfortunate about Knapp's decision is the opportunity he missed in doing so. Instead of a landmark piece by a very able and very contemporary scholar on several exciting modes of exegesis, we have a rather prosaic tour through only one of Melito's exegetical modes. In other words, Knapp ably outlines Melito's typological exegesis, but misses the opportunity of exploring the prophetic and anamnestic or liturgical modes evident and crucial in *Peri Pascha*.

⁵ Knapp, 350.

reality to exist.⁶ But, what kind of history are we thinking of? Melito would probably not approach history in the same way that we might; for instance, he would affirm that a Passover occurred (it would not occur to him not to), and that the Scriptural witness of that event, being the word of God, is the true (not to mention only) reliable witness, but he would not find it necessary to then discuss the validity of the Passover, or exactly when it happened, its socio-historical effects, and the various layers of redaction in the text.⁷ Had he found it necessary to carry on such a discussion, he surely would not have written twenty-two stanzas creatively embellishing the story (as he does in 11 to 33). Rather, the events of Passover as described in Exodus would be meaningless to Melito if they were merely history since they would be no longer relevant to him. More vital to Melito than what happened is what is happening; he is only interested in the ongoing realities of the events. Of course he would understand the pastness of a past event, but his interest is in the presence in and through Scripture.

Melito and Scripture

The Scriptures for Melito are not so much the record of past events as they actually happened – trying to prove them wrong or right in their account of history is not the point (this is a distinctly modern pre-occupation). Instead, the Scriptures are the divinely inspired message of the events, one might even say rhetoric of the events. They tell us what is revealed in Passover about God and about his relationship with his people, and are the intermediary between what happened and what it means for us. This is why Melito can say about the recently finished vigil reading of Exodus that “the words of the

⁶ So, for instance: “For the model indeed existed / but then the reality appeared” (4.31-32).

mystery have been plainly stated” (1.2), and not “the words of the *history*,” because the words of Scripture are speaking about a current reality which must be related to the hearer. A *mystery* (μυστήριον) carries the dual connotation of something both hidden and revealed, a riddle and a revelation together, and in Melito’s haggadah, the bearer of that mystery are the Scriptures themselves. Thus, when speaking about Melito’s typology, we have to understand that he is not searching for “deep connections”⁸ between what happened in the Old Testament and what happened in the New Testament, between two points in history; but he is revealing how the Scriptural expression of Passover, which teaches and not just tells us about that event, was always teaching us about the Passover of Christ. In effect, he is using the Scriptures to illuminate the Christ, in order that “what is spoken [i.e. the kerygma of the Gospel] may be elucidated through the comparison” (35.223). Melito’s typology, then, is one of mystery and not mere history, and the Scriptures were the locus of that mystery. This may mean that we are encountering a different kind of typology than we are used to dealing with, in that Melito is not playing a literary compare and contrast game. But this recognition might, in reverse, enable us to see a more vital kind of typology at work here, one which takes into account revelation, mystery, and a view of the Scriptures as having literally “become a recent word” (6.40). “Typology,” claims Stewart-Sykes, “is thus the basis for thoroughgoing hermeneutic of realization, which is the basis in turn for Melito’s homiletic use of Scripture, a making real of the events of the past to the ears and minds of his hearers.”⁹

The Mystery Revealed

⁷ For an excellent discussion on the modern approach to history and Scripture, see L.T. Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996).

⁸ Knapp, 350

With this in mind, we can return to the question of how *Peri Pascha* makes the leap from Exodus to the Christ revelation. Perhaps the first thing we can say about this is that for Melito and his community there was not a leap to be made at all. We have seen that the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets were not considered foreign documents, but that they were in effect the gospels which teach us about Christ. On a simple textual level, then, there is simply no distance to be bridged. Their faith in Christ as the fulfillment of the word, as the very Word itself, was so absolute that they would not have considered the Scriptural witness to be anything other than Christian catechesis. This is why Melito can talk about the Scriptures as a model (τύπον) and as a preliminary sketch, because he considered the law to be an exact expression, not of another faith or another reality, but of the (at that point still future) reality of the Christian revelation. The corollary of this, as Melito explains quite clearly, is that once the reality of the Gospel comes, there is no more use for the model, just as an architect's model, precious to the builders during construction, becomes largely useless once the building is finished and inhabitable. By this he does not mean to suggest by this that the Scriptures themselves are worthless – for they are the pedagogues of the Christ – but only that the “slaying of the sheep”, “the death of the sheep”, “the blood of the sheep”, “a speechless Lamb”, “the temple below”, “the Jerusalem below”, and “the narrow inheritance” (44.280 – 45.293) are no longer powerful in themselves, and are not worthy of contemplation apart from the Christ which they prefigure. Thus Melito ensures us that “What is said and done [i.e. the Christian revelation] is nothing, beloved, / without a comparison and preliminary sketch” (35.217-218). This is to say that a sketch is needed if the reality is to be understood and

⁹ Alistair Stewart-Sykes, *From Prophecy to Preaching: A Search for the Origins of the Christian Homily*, supplement to *Vigiliae Christianae* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 226.

contemplated, or even if the reality is to be valid and shown to be properly revealed. But power and importance is no longer in the sketch and model. Yet in all of this, it is clear that for Melito the Scriptures could be speaking about nothing else than the Gospel, or have any other function than to reveal, “elucidate”, (35.223) that message.

Therefore, with no perceived distance, or more accurately, difference, between the model and the reality, the Scripture and the revealed Christ, in the minds of the Sardis community, it is not hard to see how the same community could pass fluidly through an experience of the Passover to an experience of Christ. We must remember that *Peri Pascha* is not a simple literary document, but a highly developed Christian Haggadah, in effect a liturgy. As Stewart-Sykes points out, “The distinction that we might wish to make between the homiletic and the liturgical does not apply in the case of this second-century figure.”¹⁰ The Christians of Sardis have gathered not only to hear a text expounded upon, but to celebrate the true Passover of Christ, to remember it and thereby recognize the ongoing reality of that Passover, indeed to celebrate, in Melito’s words, “the force of the mystery [duδamin tou musthriou]” (34.216). In this context the genius of *Peri Pascha*’s exegetical project is shown. While there is no leap to be made in their minds, as there might be in ours, there is a journey that they make, a process of revelation. Imagine a moment being in that congregation on Pascha night. The room is dark, just a few lamps burning, and the Exodus has just been read. Melito stands up and begins the *diegma* of his haggadah, carefully and descriptively relating the events of the Passover. The ‘strange disaster’ (22.137) of the death of the first-born is related vividly. You are drawn into the story through the rhetoric so that it is not mere history to you. The power of the story, the “force of the mystery”, comes upon you when you hear Melito say, “In the darkness that could be grasped lurked death that could not be grasped”

(23.145). The darkness you are in becomes palpable to you as well, and you realize that death lurks about you as well. The description continues – the chaotic rhythm of mothers beating their own breasts in time “with the dancing of the dead” (29.193). And yet you are untouched, “guarded”, “illuminated” you hear Melito say (30.196-197). But why? “What is this strange mystery” (34.213)? This is an imaginary reconstruction, but functionally this is exactly what Melito’s rhetoric is trying to do. He begins by first exegeting, not the story to us, but us into the story. Once we are in the story, participating in the event by remembering it, he can begin to exegete the mystery before us. In other words, his exegesis presupposes our anamnestic participation in the event.

It is important, however, to see how this whole project operates within the larger framework of the work. The Christian Passover begins, we must remember, during the Jewish celebration, and should therefore be understood from the beginning as being self-consciously distinctive in character. The fasting, the gathering, the reading of the Exodus, and then Melito’s descriptive homily on the reading all takes place as the Jews, who were practically neighbours (and quite probably friends and family to some in Melito’s community) were feasting. This is why Melito begins with the description of the mystery, and then reveals the substance of the mystery as being fundamentally Christian, and it is also why he devotes this time in the evening to showing how the type of the Passover (which the Jews down the street are still celebrating) has conceded its power to the reality (which the Christians are about to celebrate). Melito is using the very context of the evening as an exegetical tool. Once the Jews have finished their feast, and the type has been revealed to be speaking in reality about Christ, Melito and his community begin their own feast of the Christian mystery, the true Passover. Only now, Melito widens his scope. The whole history of man is laid out, from the disgrace of the fall to the glory of

¹⁰ *Prophecy to Preaching*, 227.

Christ slain for the life of the world, as is indeed called for in the structure of the Haggadah. Of course, during this time the Christians are eating their ritual meal, though it would only be very hypothetical reconstruction to say what part of the haggadah fits with what part of the meal. But Melito in this part of the work is fully in the exegetical mode, and the twenty stanzas of salvation history in *Peri Pascha* are as much an apology for the Cross as they are a recapitulation of Christ's typological presence throughout that history. The fact that Melito has chosen to widen his scope only *after* he fully revealed the Exodus Passover to be a type of the Christian Passover shows that he is reading all of history through that revelation. In other words, all history is Passover history, all history is cruciform. Thus Melito, having described the descent of man into bodily corruption in much the same detail as the death of the first-born in the beginning of the work, claims that "This, then, is the reason why the mystery of the Pascha / has been fulfilled in the body of the Lord" (56.396-397). But in the very next verse, it is clear that in Melito's exegesis "the Lord made prior arrangements...well in advance" (57.398-402), even as far back as Abel. Thus he can claim that:

"if you wish to see the mystery of the Lord,
 look at Abel who is similarly murdered,
 at Isaac who is similarly bound,
 at Joseph who is similarly sold,
 at Moses who is similarly exposed,
 at David who is similarly persecuted,
 at the prophets who similarly suffer for the sake of Christ" (59.415-421).

In other words, everything leads to Christ on the Cross and everything on the way speaks about Christ on the Cross. Melito is reading Scriptural history as crucifixion history, culminating in the once for all sacrifice of Christ. It is here that the *aphikomen* piece

enters the Haggadah just at the moment that Melito has finished revealing how all history leads to and speaks about the crucified Messiah. And it is fascinating to contemplate the truly vital role which his scriptural exegesis has played to lead us to this point. With the revelation of the *aphikomen* piece (“Ουτοῖς ἀφικόμενος ἐβουβανῆς” – 66.451), the Christ has been revealed and it has been through the skillful (which is to say rhetorical) use of exegesis in the typological and anamnistic modes that has led us to that revelation. Only after the “The scripture from the Hebrew Exodus has been read” (1.1), and then have been “related” (διηγήσεται, 11.68), and only after the “force of the mystery” (34.216), the reality of the type, has been explained, and after all scriptural history has been shown to lead to and be a revelation of the Cross, is the subject of all this exegesis finally revealed in the presentation of the hidden piece of bread at the end of the Passover meal. And then, fittingly, the exegetical mode all but drops from the service. The scriptures have been rightly interpreted and have yielded their true subject, the crucified Christ. What is left to interpret? Thus it is precisely at this point, stanzas 66 through to 71, that we encounter, in its most nascent and unmediated form, the apostolic kerygma, the raw proclamation of the Gospel as Melito had inherited it, employed for no other reason than to fulfill its main function, to manifest / realize / effect the presence of the risen Lord.¹¹

The Role of Israel

It is tempting now to pass on smoothly from the Gospel proclamation to the self-revelation of Christ in stanzas 100 to 103, without making reference to the twenty-seven

¹¹ Also at this point, *Peri Pascha* changes to the more poetic mode, and it may be that we are encountering early hymns here as well. For a summary of scholarship in this aspect of *Peri Pascha* see Stewart-Sykes,

stanzas of condemnation poured upon Israel in between. But this is impossible, not because Melito's anti-Semitism must be apologized for, but because it is integral to the structure of the work as a whole. There has been much speculation about why Melito devotes so much time to explaining how and why "the King of Israel has been put to death by an Israelite right hand" (96.716). Melito certainly inherited such an emphasis from the Quartodeciman tradition in which he was steeped, where it is not so much the people in themselves who are being condemned, but the nation, specifically the nation which had been formed to receive and not put to death their Messiah. The clue to this is the repeated emphasis of this part of *Peri Pascha* on how God formed, cared for, and even visited Israel. No one reading this section could come away without knowing that God had been only righteous towards his people, and it is to the measure of God's kind-heartedness to Israel that Melito expresses outrage for Israel's own actions in return. At the heart of these stanzas is 82: "But you did not turn out to be 'Israel' / you did not 'see God', / you did not recognize the Lord" (589-592). Of all people, therefore, Israel should have seen God, should have received him, and at the very least should not have "murdered" him. Thus, Lynn Cohick claims "the focus is on those Jews who were involved with the Passion or were part of ancient Israelite tradition,"¹² to which we might add that the focus is only on them because neither the Romans nor any other gentile around were prepared or responsible for recognizing a Messiah they didn't know to expect. Melito, who is of probable Jewish background himself,¹³ is just thinking like a good Jew: what do the gentiles have to do with the Messiah? – it was not their place to receive him first. However, *Peri Pascha* did not occur within a vacuum. Whether the

Feast, 100-104.

¹² Lynn Cohick, "Melito of Sardis's PERI PASCHA and Its "Israel" HTR 91:4 (1998) 351-72. at 366

¹³ So claims Polycrates, and few dispute this. For an adequate and up to date summary of discussion of Melito's Jewish background, and of Melito himself, see Stewart-Sykes, *Feast*, 1.1.1.

members of the Sardis congregation left the celebration thinking greater ill of the Jews down the street, with whom they lived and worked is beyond knowing for sure. It may be, as Cohick observed, “that the homily piqued the curiosity of its listeners, resulting in some Christians’ visiting the local synagogue.”¹⁴ But it seems safe to say that part of Melito’s purpose must have been to show why the Lord could be present within his Paschal gathering and not within those of the Jews. The Jews had rejected God and so had forfeited their title of Israel to the Christians, so that “the people was made void when the church arose” (43.276).

Yet the question still remains as to why these stanzas are where they are within the scheme of the whole work? Presumably, if Christ is presently revealed and the mystery fully explained, then Melito should have no need to side step to another issue, namely the rejection by the Jews. In fact, it is a stroke of genius that he does. Where is the power of Christ? What effect has this lamb of God had? Indeed, if the reality has been revealed to the Christians, how is it more powerful than the type of the lamb in the Hebrew Exodus? These questions must be answered, as the answers would be essential to the validity of his claims, and he does so through this masterfully crafted section. Notice first of all how the rhetoric builds to the climax. The proclaimed Gospel is immediately followed by the acknowledged crime, the latter suffering from its proximity to the former: “It is he that has been murdered. / And where has he been murdered? In the middle of Jerusalem. / By whom? Israel” (72.505-507). From this point, Melito builds the pathos slowly through the skillful use of parallelism, rhetorical questions, irony, sarcasm, paronomasia and hypostrophe,¹⁵ and it is impossible not to get caught up into the force of his court-room style argument. Hear Melito standing as judge before his accused: “*What*

¹⁴ “PERI PASCHA and Its Israel”, 370

¹⁵ cf. Halton, “Stylistic Devices”, 254-255.

strange crime,” he asks, “have you committed” (73.519). “You killed him that made you live,” he continues (73.524). “He had to suffer, but not by you / he had to be dishonoured, but not by you, / he had to be judged, but not by you, / he had to be hung up, but not by you/ and your right hand” (75.532-536). And yet, you “rushed to the slaying of the Lord” (79.554), excelled even in the act. “Your face was bright, / his was downcast; / you were triumphant, / he was afflicted; / you were making music, / he was being judged.../ you were reclining on a soft couch, / he in grave and coffin” (80.570-581). And yet, “It was he who chose you and guided you” (83.608), and “it was he who came to you, / who healed your suffering ones, / who raised your dead” (86.625-627). Surely therefore you are not only a willing murderer but also “Ungrateful” (87.634), repaying him “evil for good / and affliction for good / and death for life” (90.660-662). Therefore, “bitter for you the hands that you bloodied” (93.691), and bitter will all things be henceforth. “O unprecedented murder! Unprecedented crime!” (97.717) committed “in the middle of the street and in the middle of the city, / at the middle of the day for all to see” (94.704-705), the just man’s death made more shameful in public. At this point, when every aspect of the murder is examined and when the shame which Christ endured is unprecedented, Melito breaks into the prophetic mode in which Christ proclaims his presence and victory. The victory has been made greater by the seeming total defeat – the resurrection made more glorious by the shame of the death. Christ’s very presence is the display of his victory, the proof that the reality has subsumed the type. Moreover, Melito further shows that Christ is the true lamb by a very subtle reading of the sheep’s role in a fascinating passage earlier in the work. “Look also at the sheep which is slain in the land of Egypt,” he says, “which struck Egypt / and saved Israel by its blood” (60.422-424). If Christ is the true lamb, then his death must simultaneously crush his enemies and save his

people, and Melito can find no better example of this than the destruction of the Temple, a fact which he reads directly through the crucifixion: “you did not tear your clothes when the Lord was hung, / so you tore them over those who were slain.../ you dashed down the Lord, / you were dashed to the ground” (99.737-744). Christ therefore stands among the Sardis community as the victor and the conqueror, the reality of the type.

Melito the Prophet

But he stands among them in the person of Melito, and this raises one more important issue in our understanding of his exegesis. What is Melito’s role in *Peri Pascha*? It is not absolutely the case that he is the bishop, overseer, of the community; he could just as easily be one of the elders whose gifts and education elevated him for the task of leading the Paschal celebration. There is no direct textual evidence in *Peri Pascha* to answer that question, but there are the references to Melito by Polycrates, a later Asian bishop, which are cited by Eusebius in his Ecclesiastical History. Although Polycrates does not say, in so many words, “Melito was a bishop”, it would be difficult to read these references as saying anything else, and so, with Stewart-Sykes and many others, “we may deduce from Polycrates’ writing that Melito was Bishop of Sardis.”¹⁶ More important, however, is Melito’s role as conveyer of the Word, the revealer of the scriptural mysteries which is at the heart of their celebration. In this, Melito functions as the prophet, the mouth of God, and it is as prophet that he exegetes the scriptures. This fact alone makes *Peri Pascha* unique among early Christian literature, since Melito is not functioning as

¹⁶ Stewart-Sykes, *On Pascha*, Introduction, 4. The most convincing reference is this one in which Polycrates claims that “seven of my race were bishops, and I am the eighth.” Both Polycrates and Melito being Jewish, and both being prominent heads of Asian communities, makes a clear case that the latter is being numbered among the seven bishops.

apologist, homilist, or commentator; his task is far more vital since he interpreting the scriptures not only in an unmediated way, that is without a canonical Gospel, but with the authority of Christ himself, evidenced by Christ's manifestation at the end. If Stewart-Sykes is right in his recent study of prophecy and preaching in the early church that "prophecy would appear to have been the most primitive form of Christian communication,"¹⁷ then Melito still stands in that early tradition, albeit at the end. Thus, Melito's exegesis of Exodus 12 is received, or at least conveyed, as directly from God himself, since Melito would be understood as speaking in the Spirit. What is missing from *Peri Pascha* is the corrective to prophecy which arose in the early church not only to test the message but also to apply it.¹⁸ However, Melito's deep reliance on Scripture, and his heavy use of Greco-Roman rhetoric, both hallmarks of second century homiletic practice, would afford no need for such a corrective, since it would appear to be built into the work in general, thus showing how "Scripture is moving to the center of Christian communication but has not yet ousted prophecy, even in the mind of the scholastic Melito."¹⁹ Melito's entire exegetical project cannot be understood without this understanding of his prophetic role, in which he is not only conveying the word of God, and so conveying the ongoing reality of God, but he is doing so on behalf of God, who is present not only through his word, but also through the person of Melito. God is all and in all in the Sardis community on Pascha night.

¹⁷ *Prophecy to Preaching*, 270.

¹⁸ This early corrective is discussed in detail in Stewart-Sykes' *From Prophecy to Preaching*, in which the claim is set forth that this post-prophetic word eventually evolved into the homily, the sermon, through its increasing reliance on the Scriptures, and the influence on the synagogue homily and Greco-Roman rhetoric. The thesis is fascinating and thoroughly studied, not to mention unique in the field, though its implications are beyond the boundaries of this paper.

¹⁹ *Prophecy to Preaching*, 228.

“THE CHILD IS FATHER TO THE MAN” – CONCLUSION

When the doxology they were singing finished, tables and chairs were brought in by the household slaves and were set up around the room. When things calmed down, Melito, still sitting, began to speak again. “You have heard the account of the model and what corresponds to it; listen to the constitution of the mystery.” One of the other Elders stepped toward Melito and asked, “What is the Pascha?” he began to explain while food was brought in - bitter herbs, unleavened bread, wine, egg, greens – and passed around. Antonia could not have expressed her joy at this time if she tried. The faces around her, her friends, were resplendent. The room was now flooded with lamp light, and everyone ate and listened and occasionally broke into loud impassioned, thunderous song throughout Melito’s teaching. Until, suddenly, Melito’s voice went softer, so that Antonia needed to concentrate fully hear. “Who takes issue with me? – let him stand against me,” she heard. His voice remained soft; she knew it was his own, but it was calm, unhurried, unstrained. “I am the one that destroyed death and triumphed over the enemy and trod down Hades and bound the strong one and carried of man to the heights of heaven; I am the one.” As she ate the bread being passed around, she knew that the Messiah was her deliverer and stood in her very midst, revealed, victorious, powerful, radiating through this night, above all nights, the force of the mystery in which she had become a communicant.

This thesis has undertaken to answer three questions: What is *Peri Pascha*? What is the function of *Peri Pascha*? And how does it accomplish that function? To the first question we have answered that *Peri Pascha* is the Quartodeciman Passover liturgy of the second century community under Melito. We have seen how the work was not originally thought to be a liturgy when it was first discovered in 1940 by Campbell Bonner, but that through the efforts of scholarship over sixty years the possibilities of its being anything else were gradually disqualified. With the 1998 publication of Stewart-Sykes’ *The Lamb’s High Feast*, Melito’s paschal liturgy could at last be confidently identified and an assessment of its significance to the scholarship of related fields could finally be made. This thesis represents a few modest steps towards that assessment.

Thus to the second question we have answered that the function of *Peri Pascha* was primarily anamnestic. This means that the Christians gathering for Passover vigil and feast on the 14th and 15th Nisan were not only gathering to celebrate something that happened in the past, or only to remember an event which was powerfully relevant to them in the present. Rather, they had gathered to recognize and participate in an ongoing event, to revive and reclaim a paschal relationship with their God. We have seen how this anamnestic function was most recognizable in the climactic stanzas (101-103), in which Christ himself speaks and becomes present to his community through the person of their Bishop, Melito.

In discussing this function, we have seen that such an anamnesis requires a large exegetical leap from a vigil reading of Exodus 12 at the beginning of the rite to the self-proclamation of Christ at the end. Thus, our third question was answered by showing that this anamnesis was made possible by Melito's skillful and rhetorical exegesis. However, Melito's community recognized no distance between Exodus 12, or the Scriptures in general, and the Christian Gospel; simply no leap was necessary. Instead, Melito's task was to exegese the hearer into the mystery and there to reveal the substance, the force of the mystery. While Melito's exegetical process can be said to be typological, we have discovered that it is of a more vital kind than a literary typology, since it is a living relationship of Scripture and Gospel that he is revealing and not a textual or historical one merely. Finally, in its very structure, context, and function, Melito's *Peri Pascha* is a meditation of the Cross as the reality to which not only Exodus 12 but all history as well points as a type. In this sense, then, Melito is being quite literal when he says that all

things “have reached as far as Christ, / on whose account were all things in the ancient law, / or rather, the recent [literally, new – new] word” (6.38-40).

One question still needs answering. What significance does Melito’s *Peri Pascha* have for the Christian community today? Clearly, his liturgy could not be celebrated as normative again – too many of its operating factors have changed. For instance, we have a New Testament now, a second set of Scriptures which mediate our reading of the first set. We therefore cannot approach the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets in quite so a prophetic manner as did Melito. Furthermore, the apostolic kerygma, which for Melito and his community was still oral in nature, now has been crystallized and canonized, one might even say, safely moored to four Apostolic Gospels. This means that our manner of reflection on Scripture has changed drastically, even if the subject has not. regarding the Quartodeciman Passover rite itself, we have advanced so far in meditation on the Christian mystery that a second century rite such as theirs could no longer reflect the same concerns. It is definitely tempting to think that Melito’s rite should be returned to for its vitality and early apostolic spirit, but to do so would neglect nearly 1900 years of Christian reflection, dogmatic development, and liturgical expression, much of which is embedded in various ways throughout the sometimes clumsy, sometimes burdensome, but still irreplaceable rites in use today. We have not strayed; we have grown.

All this seems to suggest that *Peri Pascha* does not in fact have much relevance to us today, except in so far as it teaches about history. In fact, the opposite is the case. In William Wordsworth’s phrase, “The child is father to the man.” We as the Church have not moved out of what were, or away from ourselves, but ever more into ourselves. The mystery celebrated by Melito and his community is not different in content or quality to

that which we celebrate today. We are the same Church, with the same founder, the same God, the same Cross, the same Paschal relationship. In nature we are Melito's community. But if Christ could come "in the fullness of time" (Gal. 4.4), if he himself could keep "increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man" (Luke 2.52), and if he could speak about the kingdom of God as being "like a mustard seed, which man took and threw into his own garden; and it grew and became like a tree; and the birds of the air nested in the branches," then surely it is the case that the Church herself would grow and mature within the paschal mystery of its foundation. Yet no one could claim that the growing tree to which Melito had belonged is any different to the growing tree to which we belong. Thus, *Peri Pascha* teaches us not only about who we were, but more importantly about who we are. We are the people of "the recent word", the Paschal reality. Our Scriptures are still the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets, and we still believe that they are the pedagogues of Christ. Moreover, our liturgical function is the same. We still gather to remember God, and through him to make present and powerful again the mystery of His salvation wrought upon the Cross. The story of *Peri Pascha* is our story; its message is our message. Understanding who we were means understanding who we are.

APPENDIX

The following table is based on scholarship to date, specifically that of Stewart-Sykes and Hall, and undertakes to show at least one way that we might divide *Peri Pascha* according to the form and function of the text:

<u>Rhetorical Structure</u>	<u>Peri Pascha</u>	<u>Liturgical Structure</u>
<p>Propositio – <i>The Topic and the problem is posed.</i> The Scripture has been read, and in the paschal celebration we can come to realize how it is fulfilled. PP 1 – 10</p> <p style="text-align: center;">DOXOLOGY</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">PP 1 PP 10</p>	<p>Begins Sundown on 14th Nissan Lamps are lit, A vigil is kept, All are fasting (while Jews are feasting)</p> <p>Exodus 12 is read, <i>and perhaps the Prophets too, based on Didascalia 21</i> (PP 1 – 45)</p>
<p>Narratio – <i>The background and the related facts and the history of the topic is elaborated.</i> The First-born of the Egyptians died horribly whilst Israel was liberated. The Liberation of Israel is the experience of the Christian through the commemoration of the Death of Christ. PP 11 – 33</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">PP 11 PP 33</p>	
<p>Digression – <i>A tool to keep the audience’s attention by relieving them of the topic by focusing on a related and fresh topic.</i> The Old Covenant is meant to be a type of the New Covenant. PP 34 - 45</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">PP 34 PP 45</p>	

<p style="text-align: center;">DOXOLOGY</p> <p><i>Probatio</i> – <i>The explanation is given, the case is proved, the problem is solved.</i> The whole was the result of Adam’s disgrace, as we remember the history of humankind in need of salvation. PP 45 – 65</p>	<p>PP 46 PP 65</p>	<p>At midnight of 14th / 15th Nissan, celebration begins (PP 46 – 65) “begins with disgrace and ends with the glory”</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Hors d’oeuvres – 1st cup of wine (PP 46 – 56) 2) Main Course – 2nd Cup of wine; Meal (PP 57 – 65)
<p style="text-align: center;">DOXOLOGY</p> <p><i>Peroratio</i> – <i>The case, with its history, and its solution is presented in summary and the audience is convinced.</i> Yet the Messiah came, and comes to us. In the murder of Christ by Israel, repeating their slaughter of the lamb, is the triumph of God, which in its proclamation is a present reality</p>	<p>PP 66 PP 105</p> <p>Fragment 17</p>	<p>The Messiah / the Coming One made present in the Aphikomen (PP 66 – 103)</p> <p>The Final cup of Wine (possibly Eucharistic) (Fragment 17)</p>

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