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## THE ROOTS OF THE PASCHAL VIGIL READINGS

The readings during the Easter vigil varied throughout the ancient Christian world both in their number and in the particular biblical texts that were selected. The aim of this short comparative study is to examine whether or not they share any commonality.

### EARLY SOURCES

#### *Melito of Sardis*

The oldest allusion to the reading of scripture at an Easter vigil occurs in the *Peri Pascha* of Melito of Sardis, usually dated c. 165 and regarded as a homily that was delivered during the paschal celebration itself<sup>1</sup>. The work is largely devoted to a typological exposition of Exodus 12, and Melito begins by stating that this passage has just been read. It is probably justifiable to see this reading as having been a regular part of this liturgical event, but it seems to have been a uniquely Christian innovation, as it did not form part of the Jewish Passover, where there was merely the

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1. Text and English translation in S. G. HALL, *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha and Fragments*, Oxford Early Christian Texts, Oxford, 1979. A. STEWART-SYKES, *The Lamb's High Feast*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 42, Leiden, 1998, argued that Melito's work is a Haggadah rather than a homily; for critical views, see L. H. COHICK, *The Peri Pascha attributed to Melito of Sardis. Setting, Purpose, and Sources*, Brown Judaic Studies 327, Providence, RI, 2000; C. LEONHARD, *The Jewish Pesach and the Origins of the Christian Easter*, Studia Judaica 35, Berlin-New York, 2006, pp. 42-55.

re-telling of the story of the Exodus<sup>2</sup>. What else, if anything, might have been read at Melito's vigil, we simply do not know.

### *Didascalia Apostolorum*

This third-/early-fourth-century Syrian church order speaks simply of the vigil consisting of « reading the prophets and the Gospel and the psalms ». By « prophets » it is likely that the Hebrew scriptures in general are meant, since all the Hebrew scriptures were seen as being prophetic of the Christ-event, and indeed later the author uses the term « the Scriptures » instead when describing the vigil : « the reading of the Scriptures and the psalms, and prayer and intercession<sup>3</sup>. » Whether « psalms » is referring to the use of particular psalms as independent readings or to their forming responses to the other scriptural readings, as in later practice, is not clear, although their mention separately from « the prophets » and « the Scriptures » may suggest the latter.

### *The Armenian Lectionary*

The fifth-century Armenian Lectionary offers us a complete listing of twelve Old Testament paschal vigil readings, each one followed by prayer accompanied by a genuflexion, together with an Epistle and Gospel for the Eucharist that followed (1 Corinthians 15,1-11 and Matthew 28,1-20)<sup>4</sup>. The Paris manuscript adds reference to psalmody, the position of which has been disputed among scholars (before or after each reading?)<sup>5</sup>, but as that seems to represent a later tradition, it will not be considered further here. The readings are :

Genesis 1,1-3,24	(creation and fall)
Genesis 22,1-18	(sacrifice of Isaac)
Exodus 12,1-24	(Passover)

2. See G. ROUWHORST, « The Quartodeciman Passover and the Jewish Pesach », *Questions liturgiques* 77, 1996, pp. 152-173, here at p. 172 and note 94.

3. *Didascalia* 5, 19, 1 and 6. English translation in A. STEWART-SYKES, *The Didascalia Apostolorum : An English version with Introduction and Annotation*, Studia traditionis theologiae 1, Turnhout, 2009, pp. 220-221.

4. Introduction and text in A. RENOUX, *Le Codex Arménien Jérusalem 121*, PO 35/1 and 36/2, Turnhout, 1969, 1971.

5. See A. RENOUX, « Liturgie de Jérusalem et lectionnaires arméniens, vigiles et année liturgique », *La prière des heures* (ed. Mgr. Cassien and B. Botte), Lex orandi 35, Paris, 1963, pp. 167-199, here at pp. 183-184.