

Paschal Homily: Melito of Sardis

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Paschal Homily

Melito of Sardis

FROM LAW TO LOGOS

The text of the Hebrew Exodus has been read and the words of the mystery have been explained: how the sheep was sacrificed as the salvation of the people.

Now grasp this, dearly beloved: how it is new and old, eternal and transient, corruptible and incorruptible, mortal and immortal, the mystery of the Pasch . . .

The law is old, the Logos new; the figure is transient, grace is eternal. The sheep is corruptible, the Lord is incorruptible, who was immolated as a lamb, but resurrected as God . . .

Thus the immolation of the sheep, and the rite of the Pasch, and the letter of the Law are achieved in Christ Jesus. For the Law has become Logos, and the old has become new, coming from Zion and Jerusalem. The commandment has become grace, and type has become reality, and the lamb the Son, and the sheep, man, and man, God.

For born Son-like, and led forth lamb-like, and slaughtered sheep-like, and buried man-like, he has risen God-like, being by nature God and man.

He is all things: in as much as he judges, Law; in as much as he

1. This, the earliest surviving Paschal Homily, c.170, was first discovered in a 4th century papyrus codex and published with translation in *Studies and Documents XII: The Homily on the Passion by Melito Bishop of Sardis*, ed. by Campbell Bonner (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press 1940). The discovery of a second, and better, papyrus : *Papyrus Bodmer XIII: Méliton de Sardes, Homélie sur la Pâque*, Publié par Michel Testuz (Bibliotheca Bodmeriana 1960) makes a new English translation necessary. This is supplied by the present writer in his forthcoming translation of A. Hamman et F. Quéré-Jaulmes, *Le Mystère de pâques* (Bernard Grasset, Paris 1965), to be published by Alba House Press, New York. Grateful acknowledgement is made to the Alba House Press for permission to publish the text here in a slightly abbreviated version. The editions of B. Lohse, *Die Passa-Homilie des Bischofs Meliton von Sardes* (Leiden 1958) and O. Perler, *Méliton de Sardes sur le pâque* (Sources Chrétiennes 123, Paris 1966) have further elucidated the rhythmical patterns in the text.

teaches, Word; in as much as he saves, Grace; in as much as he begets, Father; in as much as he is begotten, Son; in as much as he suffers, sheep; in as much as he is buried, man; in as much as he has risen, God.

This is Jesus Christ to whom be glory for ever and ever, Amen.

THE DEATH OF THE FIRST-BORN

Such is the mystery of the Pasch as it is written in the Law according to the reading you have just heard. I am going to explain in detail the words of the Scripture: how God gave command to Moses in Egypt, when he wished to subject Pharaoh to the scourge and to deliver Israel from the scourge by the hand of Moses.

For behold, he says, you will take a lamb without flaw or blemish, and towards evening you will slaughter it in the midst of the sons of Israel, and by night you will eat it in haste, and not a bone of it will you break. These things, he said, you will do in a single night. You will eat it according to families and tribes, with loins girt and staff in hand. For this is the Passover of the Lord, an eternal memorial for the sons of Israel. Then with the blood of the sheep you will anoint the doors of your houses, so that the angel will be deterred before the blood. For behold I will smite Egypt and in a single night she will be left childless, man and beast. . .

When the sheep was slaughtered and the Pasch was eaten; when the mystery was completed and the people elated, and Israel was marked with the seal, then the Angel came to smite Egypt, which was uninitiated in the mystery, without part in the Pasch, unsealed by the blood, unprotected by the Spirit, an enemy, an infidel . . .

For the whole of Egypt plunged in pain and plague, in tears and beatings of the breast, went to Pharaoh all in mourning not only in outward appearance but also in the heart, rending not just their outer garments but also their wanton breasts. It was a terrible sight: on one side, these beating their breasts, on the other, those bewailing, and in their midst Pharaoh grieving, seated in sackcloth and ashes, in a funeral robe of deep darkness, for Egypt draped him like a funeral garb. Such was the tunic woven for this tyrant's body; such was the garment which the Angel of Justice put on the hard-hearted Pharaoh: bitter mourning, and groping darkness, and the loss of children, and the angel's domination of the first-born, for rapid and insatiable was the death that struck them.

But what was more astonishing and terrifying you have yet to hear: in the palpable darkness impalpable Death was concealed, and in this darkness the unfortunate Egyptians were groping. And Death was groping, seeking out the firstborn sons of the Egyptians:

at the Angel's bidding. If anyone then groped in the darkness he was carried away by Death. If any firstborn grasped a dark body by the hand, horror-stricken he cried out sharply in his terror:

'Whom does my right hand grasp? Whom does my soul dread? What darkness enfolds my body? If you are my father, help me. If you are my mother, console me. If you are my brother, speak to me. If you are my friend, be gentle to me. If you are my enemy, get away from me. For I am a firstborn'.

Before the silence of the firstborn, the great Silence embraced him saying: 'You are my firstborn. It is I who am destined for you, the Silence of Death'. Another firstborn, perceiving the capture of the others, denied who he was to avoid a bitter death: 'I am not a firstborn, but I am the third in the family'. But Death, incapable of being deceived, seized the firstborn, who fell, head foremost, in silence...

Such was the disaster that enveloped Egypt; in an instant she was deprived of her offspring. Israel, however, was protected by the sacrifice of the sheep and illuminated by the shedding of blood; and the death of the sheep was like a rampart for the people.

O strange, inexplicable mystery! The sacrifice of a sheep is the salvation of Israel, and the death of a sheep becomes the life of the people, and his blood deters the angel.

FROM DESIGN TO WORK OF ART

Tell me, angel, what deterred you? The slaughter of the sheep or the life of the Lord? The death of the sheep or the figure of the Lord? The blood of the sheep or the spirit of the Lord? You were deterred because you witnessed the mystery of the Lord accomplished in the sheep, the life of the Lord in the sacrifice of the sheep, the figure of the Lord in the death of the sheep.

Therefore you did not strike Israel, but Egypt alone you deprived of her children. What is this mystery unprecedented: Egypt struck down to destruction and Israel protected and saved? Hear the meaning of this mystery.

Words and deeds, dearly beloved, are meaningless if they are separated from their symbol and prefigure. Everything said and everything done participates in this prefiguring — words in their parable, and deeds in their prefiguration; and so, just as deeds are indicated by their prototype, so words are illuminated by parable...

FIGURE AND TRUTH

As it is in the case of corruptible images so it is in incorruptible;

as it is in the earthly so it is in the heavenly. For the salvation and truth of the Lord have been prefigured in the people (of Israel), and the teachings of the gospel have been proclaimed in the law. The people were the outline of a plan and the law a letter of a parable, but the gospel is the explanation and fulfilment of the law, and the gospel is the receptacle of truth. . .

So also the law was terminated when the gospel came to light, and the people lost its identity when the Church took its place. And the figure was abolished when the Lord became manifest and what was precious yesterday is today regarded as useless, because what is truly precious has appeared.

For the sacrifice of the sheep was once of value, but now it is valueless through the life of the Lord. The death of the sheep was once of value, but now it is valueless through the salvation of the Lord. The blood of the sheep was once of value, but now it is valueless through the Spirit of the Lord. The mute lamb was once of value, but now it is valueless through the sinlessness of the Son. The temple here below was once of value, but now it is valueless because of Christ above. The earthly Jerusalem was once of value, but now it is useless because of the heavenly Jerusalem. The narrow inheritance was once of value, but now it is valueless because of the breadth of grace.

For it is not in one place or in a narrow piece of land that the glory of God resides, but his grace has been spread to the ends of the earth, and there the Almighty has pitched his tent, through Jesus Christ to whom is glory for ever and ever, Amen.

You have heard the explanation of the type and its fulfilment. Hear now also the plan of the mystery.

MAN'S UNHAPPINESS

What is the Pasch? Its name is derived from what happened, from the verb 'to suffer', to be suffering: learn then who it was who suffered, and who suffered along with the sufferer, and why the Lord is present on the earth. It is so that in the vesture of one who has suffered he may be taken up to the highest heavens.

In the beginning God made heaven and earth and everything in them. He formed man from the earth by his word and communicated the breath of life to this form. Then he placed him in paradise toward the East where he lived in happiness. Like a law he gave him this command: *From every tree of paradise you may eat for nourishment, but from the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat; for the day on which you shall eat of it you shall die . . .*

Strange and dreadful was the destruction of men upon the earth. This is what happened to them: they were snatched by tyrannical sin and let into the turmoils of passion in which they were inundated by insatiable pleasures — adultery, fornication, impurity, bad thoughts, avarice, murder, bloodshed, the tyranny of lust, the tyranny of lawlessness.

For father took up sword against son, and son raised his hand against father, and impiously smote the breasts that nurtured him; brother killed brother, host was unjust to guest, friend assassinated friend, and man slaughtered man with tyrannical right hand. All on earth became homicides, fratricides, parricides, infanticides. But something more dreadful and strange remains to be told.

A mother touched the flesh she had brought into the world. Furthermore she touched those being fed at her breast and killed in her womb the fruit of her womb, making the ill-starred mother a fearful tomb, devouring the child carried in her womb.

I will say no more. Many other things were discovered among men — strange, dreadful, and disgraceful: a father in bed with his own child, son with his own mother, and brother with sister, and man with man, and every man with every neighbour's wife . . .

What had come from dust to dust returned, and the creation of God was imprisoned in Hades. There was a sundering of what had been fairly joined, for man was dissolved into his parts by Death. A new disaster and terrible captivity enchained him. He was then taken captive by the shadows of Death. The image of the Father lay alone and abandoned.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE LORD

That is why the Paschal mystery has been fulfilled in the body of the Lord. Already the Lord had preordained his own sufferings in the patriarchs, prophets, and the whole people, and through the Law and Prophets he placed his seal. For what is to be new and great is prepared for beforehand; a coming event derives credence from its distinct prefiguration. Such, then, was the mystery of the Lord: for long prefigured but today revealed, finding credence in fulfillment although regarded as novel by man. For the mystery of the Lord is both old and new, old according to type but new according to grace.

If you look at this prefiguration you will see its truth through its fulfilment. If you wish to see the mystery of the Lord look to Abel likewise slaughtered, to Isaac likewise bound, to Joseph likewise sold, to Moses likewise exposed, to David likewise persecuted, to the prophets likewise maltreated because of Christ. Look also at

the sheep sacrificed in the land of Egypt which smote Egypt and saved Israel by its blood . . .

THE COMING OF CHRIST

He came on earth from heaven for suffering man, becoming incarnate in a virgin's womb from which he came forth as man; he took on himself the sufferings of suffering man through a body capable of suffering, and put an end to the sufferings of the flesh, and through his spirit incapable of death he became the death of death which is destructive of man.

For led like a lamb, and slaughtered like a sheep, he ransomed us from the slavery of the devil as from the hand of Pharaoh, and sealed our souls with his own spirit, and our bodily members with his own blood.

This is the one who covered death with a garment of reproach, who put the devil in mourning garb as Moses did Pharaoh. This is he who smote lawlessness and rendered injustice barren of children as Moses did Egypt.

This is the one who rescued us from slavery to liberty, from darkness to light, from death to life, from tyranny to the kingdom of eternity (who made us a new priesthood, a people chosen, eternal).

This is he who is the Passover of our salvation; this is he who suffered many things in many men. This is he who in Abel was slaughtered, in Jacob was exiled, in Joseph was sold, in Moses was exposed, in the lamb was immolated, in David was persecuted, in the prophets was maltreated. This is he who in the virgin was made incarnate, on the cross was suspended, in the earth was buried, from the dead was resurrected, to the heights of heaven was lifted up.

This is the lamb without voice, this is the lamb slaughtered, this is the lamb born of the fair ewe, this is he who was taken from the flock, and dragged to immolation, and at evening slaughtered, and by night buried. This is who who on the cross was not broken, and in the earth did not decay, but from the dead rose again, and raised up man from the depths of the tomb.

ISRAEL'S CRIME

He was put to death. Where? In the heart of Jerusalem. Why? Because he cured their lame, and cleansed their lepers, and restored sight to their blind, and raised to life their dead. That is why he suffered. For it is written in the Law and the Prophets: *They re-*

quite me evil for good, and my soul is forlorn, plotting evil against me, saying, 'Let us bind the Just One, for he is burdensome to us'.

Why, Israel, have you committed this strange injustice? You have dishonoured him who honoured you. You have despised him who glorified you. You have denied him who confessed you. You have repudiated him who proclaimed you. You have killed him who gave life to you. What have you done, Israel?

For has he not written for you: *Do not shed innocent blood lest you die in misery?* But I, says Israel, have slaughtered the Lord. Why? 'Because he had to suffer'. You are wrong, Israel, in quibbling thus about the sacrifice of the Lord.

He had to suffer, but not by you. He had to be humiliated but not by you. He had to be judged, but not by you. He had to be crucified, but not by your right hand.

Israel, you ought to have raised this cry to the Lord: 'Master, if your Son must suffer and such is your will, let him suffer, but not by me. Let him suffer by men of another race. Let him be judged by the uncircumcised. Let him be crucified by a tyrant's right hand. But by me, no'.

But you, Israel, have not raised this cry to God, nor have you expiated yourself before your Master. You have not been intimidated by his works: neither by the withered hand restored to the body, nor the eyes of the blind opened by his hand, nor the paralyzed bodies raised up by his voice, nor has the even more startling sign astonished you — the corpse raised from the tomb though dead for four days.

On the contrary, you have disdained all that. For the immolation of the Lord toward evening you have prepared sharp nails, and false witnesses, and cords and lashes, and vinegar and gall, and the sword and afflictions, as for a bloody brigand.

You have applied lashes to his body, and thorns to his head. You have bound his fair hands which fashioned you from the earth, and his beautiful mouth which fed you with life, you fed with gall, and you have slain your Lord on the great festival.

And you have been cheerful while he was hungry; you have drunk wine and eaten bread while he took vinegar and gall; your face has been lit up with joy, while his was sombre; you were rejoicing while he was oppressed; you were singing when he was condemned; you were dancing while he was being buried; you reclined on a soft cushion while he was in coffin and tomb.

Criminal Israel, why have you perpetrated this strange crime, casting new sufferings on the Lord, your Master, who has fashioned you, who has created you, who has honored you, who has named you 'Israel'?

But you have not proved to be 'Israel' for you have not seen God; you have not recognised the Lord; you have failed, Israel, to recognise that this is the first-born of God who was begotten before the morning star, who made the light to rise, and the day resplendent; who separated the darkness, who set up the first limits, who fixed the earth in its place, and dried up the abyss, and spread out the firmament, and set in order the universe; who disposed the stars in the sky, who made the lights to shine, who created the heavenly angels, who placed there the thrones, who fashioned man for himself on earth.

This was he who chose you for himself, and was your guide, from Noah to Abraham, from Abraham to Isaac and Jacob, and the twelve patriarchs.

This was he who led you to Egypt, and protected you, and nourished you there. This was he who led you by the pillar of fire, and hid you in the cloud, who divided the Red Sea and led you through it, and dispersed your enemy.

This is he who gave you manna from heaven, who gave you drink from the rock, who gave you his law on Horeb, who gave you as inheritance the (Promised) land, who sent you the prophets, who raised up your kings.

This is he who came to you, who cared for your suffering ones, and resurrected your dead.

This is he whom you have blasphemed, this is he whom you have maltreated, this is he whom you have put to death, this is he whom you have sold for silver, having put the tribute penny as price on his head.

Ungrateful Israel, come hither and be judged before me for your ingratitude. What value have you set on his direction? What value have you set on the election of your fathers? What value have you set on the descent to Egypt and your support there by goodly Joseph? What value have you set on the ten plagues? What value have you set on the column of fire by night, and the cloud by day, and the passage through the Red Sea? What value have you set on the manna from heaven, and the water from the rock, and the law given on Horeb, the inheritance of the land, and the blessings given you there?

What value have you set on the sufferers whom he cured by his presence? Think of the withered hand, which he restored to the body. Think of those blind from birth whom he restored to sight by his word. Think of those dead and buried whom he recalled from the tomb days after death.

Priceless are his gifts to you. But you, far from honouring him, have only given him ingratitude in exchange. You have returned

evil for good, affliction for joy, and death for life to him for whom you ought to die.

If a pagan king were taken by enemies, for his sake wars are undertaken, for his sake ramparts are broken, for his sake towns are destroyed, for his sake ransom is sent, for his sake envoys are despatched, so that he might be returned alive, so that his life might be saved, or that, if dead, he might receive burial.

Now, however, you have cast your vote against your Lord. In fact he who is worshipped by the pagans, and admired by the circumcized, and glorified by strangers, of whom even Pilate washed his hands has been put to death by you during the great festival.

That is why the Feast of Unleavened Bread is bitter, as your scripture says: *You shall eat unleavened bread with bitter herbs.*

Bitter for you the nails which you sharpened. Bitter for you the tongue which you whetted. Bitter for you the false witnesses you presented. Bitter for you the scourges you prepared. Bitter for you the lashes you inflicted. Bitter for you Judas whom you hired. Bitter for you Herod whom you obeyed. Bitter for you Caiaphas whom you trusted. Bitter for you the gall you prepared. Bitter for you the vinegar you cultivated. Bitter for you the thorns which you gathered. Bitter for you the hands which you bloodied.

THE PUNISHMENT OF CHRIST

For you have slain your Lord in the midst of Jerusalem. Hear, all you families of mankind and see: an unprecedented murder has taken place in the midst of Jerusalem, in the city of the law, in the city of the Hebrews, in the city of the prophets, in the city considered just.

And who has been murdered? Who is the murderer? I am reluctant to tell, but I am constrained to say. For if the murder had taken place by night, or if the slaughter had occurred in a desert place, it would be easy to keep silent. But now, in the midst of the street and the town, in the midst of the city, in full view of all the Just One has been unjustly murdered.

And so he has been hoisted on a cross and a title added, indicating he was slaughtered. Who was he? To say it is hard, but not to say it more dreadful still. Only hear it trembling on whose account the earth trembled.

He who suspended the earth is himself suspended; he who fixed the heavens is himself transfixed; he who made all things fast is made fast upon the tree. The Master has been outraged. God has been slaughtered. The King of Israel has been slain by Israel's right hand.

O strange murder! O strange injustice! The Master has been insulted, his body stripped naked, and he has not been deemed worthy of a covering to keep him concealed. That is why the lights of heaven have been turned off, and the day darkened, to hide him who was naked on the cross, to drape, not the body of the Lord, but the eyes of mankind.

For in fact the people did not tremble, the tremor was in the earth; the people showed no fear, the fear was in the heavens; the people did not rend their garments, the rending of garments was done by the angel; the people did not lament, *the Lord thundered in the heavens and the Most High uttered his voice.*

Now why, Israel, before the Lord did you not tremble? Before the Lord did you not fear, before the Lord did you not lament, before your firstborn did you not grieve, before the crucified Lord did you not rend your garments?

You have abandoned the Lord, and have not found pity with him; you have destroyed the Lord, and you lie pulverized in turn. You lie prostrate, a corpse, while he has risen from the dead, and has ascended to the highest heavens.

THE FINAL TRIUMPH

(Being) Lord, having put on human nature, and having suffered for him who was suffering, and having been bound for him who was bound, and having been condemned for him who was condemned, and having been buried for him who was buried, he rose from the dead and exclaimed: Who is he that contendeth against me? Let him stand before me. I have freed the condemned. I have restored the dead to life. I have raised to life the buried. Who is he who speaks against me? 'I', he says, 'am the Christ. I am he who destroyed death, and triumphed over the enemy, and trampled Hades underfoot, and bound the strong one, and rescued man to the heights of the heavens; I, he says, am the Christ.

'Come, then, to me all you families of mankind sullied with sin, and receive the remission of sins. For I am your forgiveness, I am the Pasch of salvation, I am the lamb immolated for you, I am your redemption, I am your life, I am your resurrection, I am your light, I am your salvation, I am your king. I lead you to the heights of heaven. I will show you the Father eternal, I will raise you by my right hand'.

This is he who made heaven and earth, and who fashioned man when time began, who was announced by the Law and the Prophets, who became incarnate in a virgin, who was hanged on a cross, buried in the earth, raised from the dead, and ascended to

the heights of heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father, and who has power to judge and to save all.

By him the Father has created everything from the beginning and for ever and ever. He is the alpha and the omega, He is the beginning and the end, the inexplicable beginning, the incomprehensible end. This is the Christ. This is the King. This is Jesus. This is the commander. This is the Lord. This is he who rose from the dead. This is he who sits at the Father's right hand. This is he who carries the Father and is carried by the Father. To him be glory and power for ever and ever, Amen.

Peace to the writer, the reader, and to those who love the Lord in simplicity of heart.

Thomas Halton, who made this translation from the Greek, is a priest of the diocese of Kilmore. Associate Professor of Greek and Latin at the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.

The eyes. What do we do with our eyes? If they are not downcast, should they not take refuge in the heavens . . . or the ceiling's tracery? Good presidency means an effort to solicit the attention of each person in the assembly with one's eyes, as well as with one's general demeanour. To attend to anything else – even the book or the bread and wine – without attending to the persons present is the opposite of the style we seek.

One need not and one should not devour the congregation with one's eyes. But there must be a constant exchange of interested, compassionate, encouraging looks, not only during reading and homily but also during song and prayer. The heavenward gaze (although there is nothing wrong with an occasional glance upward, if it fulfils a need) belongs to a view of the universe no longer with us. Our assembly gathers, conscious of the unseen and transcendent. But with our eyes we see, and what we see should be nothing less important than the people. Our brothers and our sisters are the first signs of Christ's presence, and the most important ones.

ROBERT W. HOVDA, in *Worship*, Nov. 1967. Quoted by permission.