"Liberty" is the watch-word this week for two of America's major religions. The Jewish Passover began on Tuesday, which celebrates Moses' liberation of the Israelites from slavery in ancient Egypt more than three millennia ago. On Easter, Christians observe Easter, which features the Christian belief of Christ's liberation of humans from death and sin.

Although observed in religious terms, Passover is really a celebration of nationhood, for it commemorates God's actions in freeing a group of slaves from Egypt and then forming them into an independent people under Moses' political and religious leadership.

Even as it tells the story of the Israelites leaving Egypt, Exodus 12 interrupts the tale to describe how the Passover should be celebrated, namely, with a family-based, evening meal with the two main dishes of unleavened bread (matzah) and a lamb that was specially slaughtered that afternoon. In the Exodus story itself, the blood of the slain lamb, placed on the door frame of each house, saves the first-born Israelites from the angel of death who is punishing the Egyptians.

Christianity took the Passover rite and transformed it for its own purposes, making the remembrance of a people's national formation into the unification ritual of a new religion.

According to Matthew 26, Mark 14 and Luke 22, Jesus' Last Supper is a Passover meal. It takes place on the evening following the Passover lamb's slaughter, and these gospels make a point of indicating that the disciples took special steps to prepare for the Passover meal earlier that day.

In this story, the bread which Jesus takes, breaks and gives thanks over is the unleavened bread of the Passover meal. Interestingly, Jesus indicates that the bread "is" his own body. Whether this is understood literally or symbolically, the bread points to Jesus' sacrifice of himself which is about to take place. Note it is the bread, and not the sacrificial lamb, with which Jesus identifies.

Jesus also takes the cup of wine and identifies it as his blood. In the Passover meal, blood refers to the blood of the slaughtered lamb that saved the Israelites from death. So even though there is no explicit reference to the sacrificial lamb in the Last Supper, Jesus uses the elements of the Passover rite to identify himself as the future sacrifice. In doing so, the story becomes the basis for the central identification ritual of Christianity, known as Holy Communion or the Eucharist. Jesus transforms Judaism's central formation rite into Christianity's main membership ritual.

John's Gospel tells a different story. According to its time frame, the Last Supper takes place the night before the Passover celebration. Now some modern Christians see this as a contradiction and go to great lengths to argue (unsuccessfully) that the two stories actually take place on the same night. But this exercise hides John's point, for he has a different message about Jesus and the Passover.

John's story portrays Jesus as the actual Passover sacrifice. It is only in John 19 that a soldier pierces Jesus' side to ensure he is dead rather than breaking his legs as he had done to the other victims. John says in verse 36 that this was done to fulfill the Scripture passage, "None of his bones shall be broken." This passage cites Exodus 12:46, where it is not a prophecy about Jesus but instructions about how to eat the Passover lamb.

Identifying Jesus as the Passover Sacrifice is not unfamiliar in the early church. First Corinthians 5:7 portrays Jesus as the Passover lamb and concludes "Therefore, let us celebrate the festival [of Passover]." The Passover ceremony recalling the Jews' past liberation from slavery thus becomes Christianity's present liberation from sin.