



Old Testament evidence regarding Paedocommunion

So far in our study of the question of paedocommunion, we have primarily focused upon the historical evidence for and against the practice of admitting children to the Lord's Supper. We have argued that the evidence from church history is ambiguous, and cannot be cited as a sufficient basis either for embracing or rejecting the practice of paedocommunion. Though significant sectors of the eastern and western church have admitted children to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, it is not possible to establish with certainty that this was the earliest practice of the church. Moreover, where the practice of paedocommunion has become normative, as in the eastern church, the justification for the practice often includes an appeal to a sacramental doctrine that includes some unbiblical assumptions that are incompatible with key features of the Reformed confessions. For example, the historic advocacy of paedocommunion is often defended on the basis of the conviction that the sacrament of baptism effects the regeneration or new birth of its recipients. Since baptized children are presumed to have been born again by the Spirit, it is only fitting that they should receive the Lord's Supper, which further nourishes and strengthens baptized Christians in their new life as members of Christ and recipients of His life-giving Spirit.

In our summary of the teaching of the Reformed confessions, we noted that the practice of requiring children of believing parents to profess their faith before being admitted to the Lord's Supper follows from their understanding of the nature and use of the sacraments. In the Reformed confessions, the sacraments are viewed as visible signs and seals of the promise of the gospel. The Holy Spirit produces faith through the preaching of the gospel and confirms faith through the administration of the sacraments. Just as the Word requires the Spirit-authored response of faith to communicate the grace of Jesus Christ, so the sacraments, which are a visible confirmation of the gospel Word, require faith on the part of their recipients in order for them to serve effectively as means of grace. In the Reformed confessions, all believers and their children receive the sacrament of baptism, which is a sign and seal of their incorporation into Christ and His church. However, baptism does not confer the grace of Jesus Christ regardless of the response of its recipients. Those who are baptized enjoy the privileges that belong to the reception of the sacramental sign of incorporation into Christ. But they simultaneously are placed under the obligation to embrace the gospel promise that was signified and sealed to them in their baptism. The instruction of children of believing parents in the Christian faith is undertaken in order to prepare them to respond appropriately to their baptism in the way of faith and *thereby* be admitted to the Table of the Lord. What distinguishes the Lord's Supper is that it is a sacramental means of nourishing faith that requires, in the nature of the case, the attestation (through public profession) of the kind of faith that can properly remember, discern and proclaim the death of Christ. Because the Lord's Supper is designed to nourish faith, it requires the presence of faith on the part of its recipients.

Having considered the historical and confessional arguments for and against paedocommunion, we are now obliged to turn to the biblical evidence that may bear upon this practice. What biblical evidence is there to support or to oppose the practice of admitting the children of believing parents to the Lord's Supper? Though the teaching of the New Testament is of decisive importance for determining who should be admitted to the Table of the Lord, we will begin with a consideration of the Old Testament evidence. Advocates of paedocommunion often appeal to the inclusion of children within the covenant in its Old Testament administration as a point of departure for interpreting the teaching and practice of the New Testament. Since in the old covenant children received the sign and seal of covenant membership in the rite of circumcision, and since they were granted the privilege of participation in many of the covenant observances, including the important

rite of the Passover, we should proceed from the conviction that a similar circumstance will likely obtain in the new covenant. When we take note of the way the new covenant frequently enlarges the privileges of covenant inclusion in comparison to the old, we may expect, according to paedocommunion advocates, that this would likely include their participation in the sacraments of the new covenant. Though Reformed churches have historically recognized this with respect to the baptism of the children of believers, they have inconsistently refused to reckon with its implications for their participation in the Lord's Supper.

In order to evaluate these claims of paedocommunionists, we will begin with a review of the kinds of Old Testament evidence that they frequently adduce. Since the principal component of the argument from the Old Testament for the admission of children to the Lord's Table is an argument from the analogy between the Passover and the Lord's Supper, this will occupy most of our attention. In the first part of our consideration of the Old Testament evidence, we will be content to set forth the common form of the argument of advocates of paedocommunion. After this argument has been summarized, we will evaluate its strength to determine whether it can sustain the weight that many paedocommunionists place upon it.

The paedocommunion argument from the Old Testament

The argument for paedocommunion from the analogy with the Old Testament Passover is a wellknown and common feature of the case for the admission of children to the Lord's Supper. However, this argument does not stand alone. Though it plays an important role in the case for paedocommunion, it only does so within the context of a broader argument that appeals to the precedent of the inclusion of children within the life and privileges of the Old Testament covenant community. The incorporation of children within the covenant community, which was signified and sealed to them by means of circumcision (Genesis 17:7-14), is an essential feature of the administration of the covenant of grace in the Old Testament. The children of the covenant community, no less than their parents, were regarded as recipients of the covenant promises and obligations. They enjoyed, consistent with their status as members of the covenant community, many of the privileges and benefits of covenant communion with the Lord and those who belonged to the people of God.

The participation of children in covenant observance

Of particular interest to the paedocommunionist is the way children in the old covenant participated in various covenant ordinances, including covenant meals and rites that find their fulfillment in Christ. The participation of children in these covenant observances illustrates their place within the covenant community. They also suggest that it would be inconsistent with Old Testament precedents to prohibit children in the new covenant from enjoying the privilege of participation in its rites, including the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Though we will not treat all of these observances, several are of special interest to the case for paedocommunion.

Among the important covenant observances in which children participated were the "*wilderness meals*" (Exodus 16:13-20). During the period of Israel's wilderness wandering before the entrance into the land of promise, all the people of Israel enjoyed the Lord's provision of daily manna from heaven. The children of Israel participated in these meals together with their parents. The importance of the participation by children in these meals is highlighted by the way the apostle Paul describes them as a means of participation in Christ in 1 Corinthians 10:1-13. According to Paul, the children of Israel "*were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ*" (vv. 1-4). In the argument for paedocommunion, the fact that Paul describes the people of Israel, including the children, participating spiritually in Christ by means of these "*wilderness meals*" is an important precedent for their spiritual participation in Christ by means of the Lord's Supper. Remarkably, after this description of the wilderness meals at the outset of 1 Corinthians 10, the apostle Paul goes on to speak of the Corinthians participation in the body and blood of Christ through the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper (vv. 14-17). The Old Testament participation in Christ through the wilderness meals parallels in an important way the New Testament

participation in Christ through the Lord's Supper. The implication of this is that the wilderness meals represent an Old Testament precedent for the admission of children to the Table of the Lord.

Next to the precedent of the participation of covenant children in the wilderness meals, advocates of paedocommunion also appeal to the great feasts of the Old Testament, particularly the annual observance of the Feast of the Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 16). Since we will consider the Feast of the Passover in the next section, we will restrict our discussion at this point to the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Booths.

In the book of Deuteronomy, which provides detailed instructions for the worship of the people of Israel in the land of promise, the observance of these feasts, together with the presentation of various offerings and sacrifices, is to take place at the centralized place of worship where the Lord has put His name and that He has chosen as His dwelling place (Deuteronomy 12:4-6). The people of Israel are commanded to worship the Lord in accordance with the provisions of the covenant, which emphasize that the sacrifices are to be presented at the altar in the temple in Jerusalem. Specific instructions are also given for keeping the three annual Feasts in Jerusalem. What is especially significant about these instructions is that they expressly speak of the participation of children in the meals that accompany some of the sacrificial offerings and the annual festivals (Deuteronomy 12:7, 12, 18). Though there were some restrictions upon the participation of the Israelites and their children in the meals that accompany the guilt and sin offerings (e.g. Leviticus 6:29; 7:6-9), these restrictions do not apply to the Feasts of Tabernacles and of Booths. The Feast of Weeks, which celebrates the Lord's provision for the people in the land of promise, required the presentation of a "*tribute of a freewill offering*" to the Lord in gratitude for His blessings. The celebration that accompanied this freewill offering called all the children of Israel, young and old alike, to rejoice before the Lord for His goodness and bounty (Deuteronomy 12:11). In the provisions for the Feast of Booths, the children of Israel are commanded to celebrate the harvest by rejoicing in the feast before the Lord. This Feast, like the Feast of Weeks, expressly enjoined the participation of all the people — parents and children, the Levites, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow (Deuteronomy 12:14). Even though only the males in Israel were required to keep these feasts on an annual basis (Deuteronomy 16:16), the provisions of the covenant make it clear that all the Israelites, men, women, and children, were permitted to take part and join fully in their celebration. The requirement that males participate in these feasts does not mean that other members of the community, younger children and women for example, were not permitted to participate.

While advocates of paedocommunion acknowledge that covenant children did not participate in all the Old Testament rites and meals associated with the various sacrifices stipulated in the Levitical legislation, they claim that the participation of children in these old covenant observances and meals constitutes an important line of evidence for the admission of children to the new covenant Table of the Lord. Since these observances and meals find their fulfillment in Christ, the participation of children in them represents a kind of participation in Christ under the "types" and "shadows" of the Old Testament legislation. At the least, they create a kind of presumption for the admission of children to the Lord's Table, provided there is no clear New Testament prohibition against such admission.

The participation of children in the Passover

The principal piece of Old Testament evidence that is commonly cited by advocates of paedocommunion, however, is the Old Testament rite of the Passover (or the "*Feast of Unleavened Bread*," as it is termed in Deuteronomy 16). Among the old covenant practices that have the most direct bearing upon the new covenant sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Passover deserves to be given pride of place. Since the Lord's Supper was instituted in the context of the Passover celebration (Matthew 26:17-29), and since the essential elements of the Lord's Supper were derived from the Passover (the bread and the cup), the Passover represents the most obvious and relevant Old Testament antecedent or "anti-type" for the New Testament sacrament. According to those who favor the admission of children to the Table of the Lord, such a practice alone does justice to the important connections between the Passover and the Lord's Supper, and particularly to the fact that children were admitted to the Passover Feast. Just as children

participated in the Passover remembrance and proclamation of Israel's deliverance in Egypt through the blood of the Passover lamb, so children in the new covenant should participate in the remembrance and proclamation of the church's deliverance through the blood of Christ, who is her "*Passover lamb*" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

In order to make a case for paedocommunion from the Old Testament precedent of the Passover, proponents of paedocommunion usually argue in two ways. On the one hand, they insist that the requirements for participation in the Passover were not such as would exclude children. And on the other hand, they argue that there is positive evidence to warrant the conclusion that children were permitted to participate fully in the Passover.

Among the practices that belong to the Old Testament Passover, several appear initially to exclude the likelihood that infants and younger children participated in the Feast. The description of the first Passover in Exodus 12 includes the following practices that became part of the annual Passover Feasts in Jerusalem: the eating of the Passover lamb "*according to what each can eat*" (Exodus 12:4) the eating of unleavened bread and bitter herbs (Exodus 12:8); and a kind of "catechetical exercise" in which the children are to ask, "*What do you mean by these service?*" (Exodus 12:26). Each of these elements of the original Passover seems to require a measure of maturity and spiritual discernment that would exclude full participation in the Passover meal by infants and younger children. Furthermore, the subsequent annual celebrations of the Passover in Jerusalem included several additional features that seem inconsistent with the participation of all the children: the stipulation that only the males were required to keep the annual Feast (Deuteronomy 16:16); the requirements of "*ritual cleanness*" on the part of the Passover celebrants (Numbers 9:6; John 18:28); and the incorporation of the "*cup of blessing*," which involved the drinking of wine (an intoxicant) on the part of the Passover participants. In their response to this kind of evidence against the participation of children in the Passover, paedocommunionists maintain that young children were (and are) capable of eating the Passover elements. They also argue that the "catechetical exercise," which was an important component of the Passover celebration, would not prevent little children from participating. According to paedocommunion advocates, this exercise was not a "pre-requisite" for participation in the Passover, nor was it substantially different from other, similar exercises in which the Lord made provision for children to be taught to remember His covenant faithfulness (compare Joshua 4:6-7; Deuteronomy 6:20-21). Though paedocommunionists acknowledge that females and younger children were not required to keep the annual Passover, the requirement that males keep the Feast is not tantamount to a prohibition against the participation of the entire community — men and women, young and old. None of these common objections to the participation of children in the Old Testament Passover, therefore, proves convincingly that children were not permitted to join in the celebration.

The argument of the paedocommunionist is not limited to answering these common objections to the participation of the children in the Passover. Several positive considerations are also cited in favor of the claim that the traditional practice involved the full participation of the children of the covenant. According to advocates of paedocommunion, there is ample evidence for the likelihood that children participated in the Passover at a very early age. If we remember the basic starting point of the Old Testament administration of the covenant, namely, that the children were included as full members of the covenant community (cf. Deuteronomy 29:9-13), this evidence seems undeniable. In the description of Exodus 12, the first Passover is consistently viewed as a "household" rite, which included the active engagement of all who were members of the household, whatever their age (vv. 3, 4, 21, 24, 26). In the provisions for the selection of the Passover lamb, consideration is to be given to the size of the particular household (v. 4). Within the contours of this thoroughly covenantal framework of household celebration, the only stipulated requirement for the participation of any household member in the Passover was that all male members needed to be circumcised (12:43-49). The only persons who are expressly prohibited from participation in the Passover feast are those who were uncircumcised. Since the Passover is one of the three great feasts that the children of Israel were to celebrate annually in Jerusalem, it is significant that the general description of these feasts in Deuteronomy 12 specifies the inclusion and participation of children in their observances (12:6-7, 11-12). If these kinds of evidences are given appropriate weight, it seems most likely that the Old Testament Passover was a covenant feast in which the children of the households of Israel fully participated.

No doubt there are other dimensions of the paedocommunionist argument from the Old Testament for the practice of paedocommunion. However, our summary of the most common form of the argument from Old Testament precedents is sufficient for our purpose.

Above I summarized the common argument that advocates of paedocommunion derive from the teaching of the Old Testament. This argument appeals primarily to two kinds of evidence, the second of which is the most important. First, an appeal is made to the inclusion of the children of believers within the covenant community and their participation in a number of the observances of the older covenant. And second, an appeal is made to the participation of children in the celebration of the Feast of the Passover, which is regarded as the most important Old Testament type of the New Testament sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Even though my summary may have omitted some features of the paedocommunionist argument, these are the most important and relevant considerations from the evidence of the Old Testament. According to advocates of the practice of paedocommunion, these Old Testament precedents constitute a sufficient basis for the presumption that children should be granted the privilege of participating in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper under the new covenant administration.

In effect, the paedocommunionist argument from the Old Testament grants the premise of one, common objection of Baptists to the Reformed view of paedobaptism. That objection claims that there is an inconsistency in administering the sacrament of baptism to the children of believing parents, which assumes that they are included with the covenant community and recipients of the gospel promise in Christ, and at the same time refusing such children admission to the Lord's Table. In the opinion of many advocates of the admission of children to the Lord's Table, this objection legitimately identifies a real inconsistency in the historic practice of the Reformed churches.

Now that we have identified the main features of the argument for paedocommunion from the Old Testament, we are in a position to evaluate this evidence and draw a preliminary conclusion regarding the implications of Old Testament practice. I will first evaluate the evidence of the participation of children in various Old Testament practices. After evaluating this evidence, I will then address the evidence drawn from the Old Testament Passover. Though we will conclude that the Old Testament does not provide a case for the admission of children to the Lord's Supper, our conclusions at this juncture will have to be tentative. Since the most important evidence must be drawn from the New Testament, which norms the practice of the believing community under the new covenant, no definitive conclusion regarding the biblical propriety of the practice of paedocommunion may be reached without a consideration of the relevant New Testament data.

A critical evaluation of the paedocommunion argument from the Old Testament

Two relevant principles to note

As we evaluate the Old Testament evidence that might have relevance to the subject of paedocommunion, we need to bear in mind two important biblical principles that tend to be slighted by advocates of paedocommunion. The first principle is that the ultimate norm for the practice of the church must be the New Testament description of the administration of the new covenant. The second principle is that participation in the observances of the covenant, whether in terms of Old Testament or New Testament teaching, must be governed by the Lord's insistence that His people worship Him *"in spirit and in truth"* (John 4:24).

The first principle is a basic rule of biblical interpretation that acknowledges the progress of the history of redemption and revelation. Whatever continuities may exist between the old covenant and the new covenant, we may not determine the practice of the new covenant community of faith by a simple, direct appeal to the practice of the old covenant. Though Reformed believers confess that the old and new covenants are *"one in substance,"* they also confess that they are different in their *"mode of administration."* There is one covenant of grace, which was first formally established with Abraham (Genesis 15, 17), but this covenant was variously administered throughout the course of the covenant Lord's dealings with His people in the history of redemption. For example,

the covenant relationship between the Lord and His people changes in important respects in the transition from the Abrahamic covenant to the Mosaic covenant. Similarly, with the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in the fullness of time, a “new” and “better” covenant than that of Moses has been instituted (cf. Hebrews 7:22; 12:24). We may expect that this new and better covenant will differ significantly in some features of its administration from what was true under the old covenant.

Any consideration of the practice of the old covenant community, particularly its significance for the question of a new covenant practice like that of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, must reckon with this principle. Since the specific form of the old covenant administration has been replaced with that of the new covenant administration, we may not argue for a practice solely on the basis of Old Testament precedents. The general application of this principle is illustrated by the abrogation of the entirety of the “ceremonial legislation” of the old covenant, which finds its fulfillment in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Since the ceremonial legislation of the old covenant is fulfilled in Christ, the substance and reality to which this legislation pointed forward still remains. However, the ceremonies and types of the old administration end with the introduction of the new. Since the Lord’s Supper marks the “*new covenant in (Jesus’) blood*” (Luke 22:20), it must be governed by the New Testament’s teaching regarding the Lord’s Supper. Though this is not the place to review the differences between the Old Testament Passover and the New Testament Lord’s Supper, it is important to observe that the latter is an observance that belongs to the “*new covenant*” and points to the fulfillment of all the sacrifices of the Old Testament legislation. There is no single Old Testament precedent for the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, not even the Feast of the Passover, which might superficially appear to be the most obvious candidate for this status.

In addition to this basic principle of interpretation, we should also note the Old Testament emphasis, which is also enunciated in the New Testament, that the Lord insists that His people worship Him in a responsible and informed manner (Psalm 50:13-16; Isaiah 1:10 17; 66:3; Jeremiah 7:21-26; Amos 5:21 24; Micha 6:6-8). Though this principle does not directly speak to the question whether children participated fully in the observances of the Old Testament, it does warn against an assumption that sometimes creeps into the argument of paedocommunionists. This assumption is that simple membership in the covenant community automatically grants to believers and their children access to all of its rites and observances. In the argument of many paedocommunionists, covenant membership virtually guarantees full participation by every member of the covenant community in all features of the covenant. Any restrictions upon participation in covenant observances, particularly restrictions that might demand a responsible and intelligent appreciation of what the observance means, are regarded with suspicion, as though they were tantamount to a denial of the covenant member’s status. As we shall see in the course of treatment of the biblical evidence pertaining to participation in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, the Old and New Testaments norm the practice of the covenant community in a way that often restricts participation in some aspects of the covenant’s observances. Frequently, these restrictions have to do with stipulated requirements that must be met prior to participation on the part of believers and their children.

Though we are only noting these two principles here, it will become apparent as we take up the paedocommunion argument from the Old Testament, and subsequently from the New Testament, that they have significant implications for evaluating the strength of the case for the admission of children to the Lord’s Supper.

The limitations of the argument from the participation of children in Old Covenant observances

If we keep these two principles in mind as we evaluate the Old Testament evidence, there are several features of its teaching that are slighted in the argument of paedocommunionists. These features suggest that there are limits to the argument for paedocommunion from the alleged precedents of the Old Testament.

We have noted, for example, how paedocommunionists often appeal to the participation of children in the eating of the manna that the Lord provided His people in the wilderness. Since the apostle Paul draws an analogy between this provision of manna and the participation of the new covenant

community in Christ by means of the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 10:1-5, 14ff.), this is adduced as an example of an Old Testament precedent for paedocommunion. The argument is not as strong as it might first appear, however. In a sense, it might be regarded as an example of "proving too much." In the account of the provision of manna in Exodus, we are not told that there were any restrictions upon the community's participation in the eating of manna and drinking of the water from the rock (Exodus 16-17). Presumably, even strangers to the covenant community as well as animals were nourished by the food and drink that the Lord miraculously supplied for their daily sustenance. If the assumption were correct that participation in this eating and drinking is a clear Old Testament precedent for the participation of children in the Lord's Supper, one could also argue for the participation of unbelievers and strangers to the covenant. The circumstances of Israel's eating manna in the wilderness may have significance as a "type" of the covenant community's participation in Christ, but there are significant differences between this Old Testament observance and the New Testament sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

The limits of this precedent for children partaking of the Lord's Supper is similar to the limits of other Old Testament observances that have a New Testament counterpart. For example, there are important differences that exist between the Old Testament rite of circumcision, which in the nature of the case only applied to the male members of the covenant community, and the New Testament sacrament of baptism, which is administered to men and women. And there are significant differences between the *annual* celebration of the Passover at a central location in Jerusalem, and the *frequent* administration of the Lord's Supper in the sanctuary/assembly of the Lord's new covenant people. It is simply impossible to determine the proper administration of the new covenant by a direct appeal to these kinds of alleged Old Testament precedents.

Another Old Testament precedent to which paedocommunionists appeal is the participation of children in the Feasts of Weeks and of Tabernacles. Since children were instructed to take part in these Feasts, and were also permitted to partake of peace- and firstfruit-offerings (cf. Numbers 6:2, 13-21; Deuteronomy 12:6ff.; 14:23-26; 15:19ff.; 16:10ff.; Proverbs 7:14), we have ample Old Testament examples of their participation in covenant meals. These examples support the presumption that children should also partake of the Lord's Supper in the new covenant. Since these examples testify to the inclusion of children within the covenant community and its privileges, they are not without relevance. However, they do not include some of the most important sacrifices of the old covenant that more directly "typify" the sacrifice of Christ, which the Lord's Supper commemorates and proclaims. Some of these Old Testament sacrifices did not permit participation on the part of the whole covenant community in the meals that accompanied them. For example, it is interesting to observe that the sacrifices that were regularly to be offered in Israel, and that were symbolic of the "work of atonement," were sacrifices that could only be offered by the Levitical priests. These atoning sacrifices, which included stipulations that no bone of the sacrificial victim was to be broken and that its flesh must not be left overnight, included meals that were confined to the priests who were on duty in the sanctuary (Leviticus 2:3, 10; 5:13; 6:16-18, 26, 29; 7:6-10; 10:12ff.; 14:13; Numbers 18:9ff.) or to the priests and their wives and children at home (Leviticus 10:14ff.; 22:11-13; Numbers 18:11-19). Furthermore, the sacrifice offered by the high priest on the annual day of atonement did not include an accompanying meal, since the meat of the sacrificial animal was discarded and burned (cf. Hebrews 7:26ff.; 8:1ff.; 9:6-7, 11-14; 10:19ff.; Leviticus 16:7).

Since the Lord's Supper remembers and proclaims especially the atoning aspects of Christ's work, which were typified by means of these sacrifices and their accompanying meals, these old covenant rites are among the most important Old Testament prefigurements of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. While paedocommunionists do not deny this, they argue that the restrictions associated with these sacrifices belong to the shadows of the old covenant. Since we no longer have a distinct priesthood in the new covenant (Christ is our "*only High priest*"), these restrictions do not hold any longer. The problem with the paedocommunion argument at this point, however, is that these Old Testament observances further confirm how difficult it is to conclude from Old Testament precedents that all members of the covenant community should partake of the Lord's Supper. The paedocommunion argument appeals to those observances of the Old Testament that support the full participation of all covenant members, while downplaying those that stipulate restrictions. This is particularly significant, since the restricted observances often concern precisely

those Old Testament rites that have the most direct bearing upon the sacrifice of Christ that the Lord's Supper commemorates.

In our subsequent consideration of the New Testament evidence for or against paedocommunion, we will have occasion to argue that the new covenant sacrament of the Lord's Supper is much more than an "updated" version of the old covenant sacrament of the Passover. In the context of that consideration, we will return to one of the most important Old Testament precedents for the Lord's Supper, the sealing of the old covenant that is described in Exodus 24. At this point in our evaluation of the paedocommunion argument from the Old Testament, however, we need to consider the importance of the event recorded in Exodus 24 for our claim that there are limits to the argument that appeals to Old Testament precedents. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, he said, *"This is my blood of the covenant,"* which is a quotation from Exodus 24 (cf. Hebrews 8-10). In the book of Hebrews, the author maintains that the blood of Jesus is the distinguishing mark of the new covenant and that it surpasses the blood of the old covenant, which was sprinkled over the people of Israel by Moses (Hebrews 9:20). This means that the New Testament views the event recorded in Exodus 24 as one, if not *the most important*, of the Old Testament precedents for the Lord's Supper.

In the account of this event in Exodus 24, which follows the giving of the law of God at Sinai and the people's pledge to live obediently before the Lord, it appears to have been a kind of sign and seal of the covenant relationship between the Lord and His people. Though it might be an overstatement to call this event an Old Testament "sacrament," it functions in a quasi-sacramental way as a visible token and confirmation of the covenant communion between the Lord and the children of Israel. In Exodus 24, we read that Moses, the covenant Mediator, first sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings before the Lord. These offerings represented the fellowship and communion that existed between the Lord and His covenant people. After gathering the blood of these sacrificial bulls, Moses then spread the blood over both the altar, which represented the Lord's presence, and the people of Israel (including the children). Perhaps the most important feature of this event, is the fellowship meal that was celebrated on the mountain. In the account of this event, we read:

"Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank."

(Exodus 24:9-11)

When the Lord Jesus Christ used the words of Exodus 24 in the act of instituting the Lord's Supper, therefore, he was appealing to this Old Testament fellowship meal that Moses and the leaders of Israel celebrated on the mountain. After the children of Israel were covered by the blood of the covenant, this meal signified and sealed their communion with the covenant Lord. Since the blood atonement that preceded this meal was only a type of the blood atonement that the writer of Hebrews teaches was ultimately provided by Christ, this ceremony and its accompanying meal were only celebrated once, and never again. Since Christ's atoning work fulfills what this atonement ceremony could only typify, the Lord's Supper, which is the new covenant fulfillment of this event, is celebrated frequently by the new covenant believer who enjoys a full communion with the Lord on the basis of the accomplished work of Christ.

Though this Old Testament observance represents the most significant Old Testament background to the institution and meaning of the Lord's Supper, it also illustrates the difficulty of directly appealing to the Old Testament for determining the practice of the church. It is impossible to argue from the meal that was celebrated at this time in Israel's history that all believers and their children should participate in the Lord's Supper, which is its new covenant fulfillment. It is likewise impossible to prove from the circumstances of this meal that only the leaders of the new covenant community should participate in the Lord's Supper. What can be derived from this event, however, is that there are Old Testament precedents for the Lord's Supper — this one in particular — that do not support the paedocommunionist argument that the Passover is the principal Old Testament background for the Lord's Supper. Furthermore, this important Old Testament precedent in Exodus

24 does not lend support for any direct inferences regarding who should partake of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in the new covenant administration.

My purpose in citing these examples of the limits of the paedocommunionist appeal to Old Testament precedents for the participation of children in covenant observances, is rather modest. I have not cited this evidence from the Old Testament to establish a firm conclusion regarding whether children should be admitted to the Lord's Table. Rather, I have appealed to these principles of interpretation and examples of Old Testament practice to show that it is not possible to determine the practice of the new covenant simply by appealing to evidence from the Old Testament.

Before we can draw any further conclusions at this point, we need still to consider the most important piece of evidence from the Old Testament, so far as the argument for paedocommunion is concerned. And that is the alleged precedent of the participation of children in the celebration of the Passover. Accordingly, we will turn to the subject of the Old Testament Passover and its significance for the question of paedocommunion.

When we take up the New Testament evidence pertaining to the admission of children to the Lord's Table, we will have occasion to consider the important differences between the Old Testament Passover and the New Testament Lord's Supper. These differences are significant for determining whether the Old Testament Passover is truly a precedent for the participation of children in the Lord's Supper. If we assume that the Lord's Supper is simply a New Testament form of the Old Testament Passover, the paedocommunionist insistence that children should partake of this sacrament may appear to have a measure of plausibility. But if the Lord's Supper is not simply a New Testament form of the Old Testament rite, the appeal to the analogy with the Passover loses much of its persuasiveness. Consequently, in our consideration of the New Testament evidence in subsequent articles, we will have to give special attention to the uniqueness of the Lord's Supper as a new covenant sacrament in our evaluation of the case for paedocommunion.

Our primary purpose at this point, however, is to evaluate the evidence for the admission of children to the Lord's Supper that is allegedly derived from the Old Testament Passover. We will restrict our treatment of this evidence in this article, accordingly, to what we know from the Old Testament. In keeping with our earlier observation about the priority of the New Testament's teaching for the question of the participation of children in the Lord's Supper, our evaluation of the paedocommunion argument from the Passover will not permit us to draw anything more than a tentative conclusion. Only after we turn directly to the New Testament evidence will we be able to reach any firm conclusions regarding the practice of paedocommunion.

The limitations of the Passover analogy

One of the immediate problems that confronts any student of the Old Testament Passover is that there is no indisputable evidence for or against the claim that all of the children of the covenant participated fully in its celebration. Despite the claim of some paedocommunion advocates that all children of the household fully participated (with the exception, perhaps, of unweaned infants) in the Passover feast, the relevant Old Testament passages do not warrant this kind of unqualified claim.

Not only are there some biblical restrictions upon participation in the Passover rite, but there are also limitations in the traditional practice of Israel upon the participation of some members of the covenant community. In order to determine what were the most important features of the Old Testament Passover, there are several considerations that need to be borne in mind. Before we draw a tentative conclusion on the basis of the available evidence, we will summarize these considerations in the form of several observations about participation in the Passover feast.

First, any consideration of the precedent of the Old Testament Passover must keep in mind the important distinction between the first and subsequent celebrations of the Passover. Whereas the first Passover in Egypt was clearly a household celebration, the stipulations for later celebrations of the Passover require that it and the other two pilgrim feasts (Feast of Tabernacles, Feast of Weeks) be kept only by the male members of the covenant community (Deuteronomy 16:16;

Exodus 23:17; 34:23). Though the stipulation that only circumcised men of the covenant community keep the Passover at the centralized sanctuary in Jerusalem does not expressly exclude the participation of women and young children, it does represent a significant change in the way the Passover was to be celebrated. While the women and children were to eat the unleavened bread in all Israel's borders, the men were to go up to Jerusalem in order to fulfill the obligations of the Passover *"to the Lord your God"* and *"at the place that the Lord your God will choose, to make his name dwell in it"* (Deuteronomy 16:2, 5-7, 16ff.). These Deuteronomic provisions for the annual celebration of the pilgrim Passover do not require, nor do they seem to anticipate, the participation of the women and younger children of the covenant community.

Indeed, it is possible to view these requirements for the participation of the men of the covenant community as a kind of Old Testament "public profession of faith." Participation in the Passover is no perfunctory rite, but places a considerable responsibility upon its participants to prepare for and keep the feast in accordance with all of the stipulations of the law of the covenant. Once we acknowledge that these stipulations were normative for the annual feast of the Passover in Israel, the paedocommunionist argument that all of the children in Israel participated in the Passover becomes rather unlikely. Moreover, the assumption of the paedocommunion argument, namely, that non-participation in this covenant meal is tantamount to a kind of exclusion from full covenant membership and its privileges, is not valid. It is a gratuitous assumption to insist that enjoyment of the privileges of the covenant requires that all members of the covenant community participate to the same extent in the Feast of the Passover. Were this assumption correct, we would expect the Old Testament provisions for the Passover to *require* the participation of all members of the covenant people.

Second, the insistence on the part of advocates of paedocommunion that all the children of the Israelite households ate the Passover meal is a possible construction of the Old Testament evidence, but it is not a likely one. Even the most ardent paedocommunion advocates acknowledge that unweaned infants could not eat some of the elements of the Passover meal (for example, the meat). While acknowledging this restriction upon the participation of unweaned infants, proponents of paedocommunion appeal to the language of Exodus 12:4, *"according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb,"* to argue that the only requirement for eating the Passover was the capacity to consume the meal. Since a similar phrase is used in Exodus 16:16, 18, 21, to refer to the manna that the children also ate, paedocommunionists maintain that this language implies the participation of all members of the household, the only exception being the infant children.

But as the English Standard Version of this phrase suggests, this passage does not mean simply what our expression, *"so many mouths to feed,"* means. Rather than referring to the number of persons in the household, the language of this text refers to how much each member of the household was capable of eating. Whether infants and very young children were able to eat all the elements of the Passover meal remains, so far as the meaning of this phrase is concerned, undetermined. These elements of the Passover meal included roast lamb, unleavened bread (a kind of dry biscuit), and bitter herbs (Exodus 12:8ff.; Numbers 9:11).

While newly weaned infants and younger children might possibly be able to eat the unleavened bread, it is implausible that they could digest the roast lamb and particularly the bitter herbs. All of the stipulated elements of the Passover meal, even on the occasion of its first celebration by the households of Israel in Egypt, were not likely to have been eaten by infants and the younger children of the household.

In connection with the question whether infants and very young children were able to consume the elements of the Passover meal, it should also be noted that subsequent Passovers included an additional element, namely, the cup of blessing. This cup of blessing added wine to the elements that typically belonged to the traditional Passover meal. Even though it is not clear how this element came to have a prominent role in the celebration of the Passover — it is not stipulated in the Old Testament legislation regarding this rite — its addition to the elements of the Passover meal adds a further obstacle to the claim of paedocommunionists that all the children of the household shared fully in the Passover meal. Since wine is an intoxicant and not suited to

consumption by infants and very young children, it hardly seems to be an element of the Passover meal that they would be permitted to consume.

Third, in our previous discussion of the paedocommunionist appeal to the Old Testament Passover, we observed that the Passover feast included, as one of its prescribed features, a kind of “catechetical” exercise. At a certain point in the Passover rite, the children of the household were to ask, *“What do you mean by this service?”* (Exodus 12:27). In reply to this question, the head of household was to declare, *“It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses.”* The presence of this catechetical exercise in the context of the Passover rite does not by itself argue conclusively for or against the participation of infants and younger children. Advocates of paedocommunion will observe that an intelligent participation in this feature of the Passover celebration is not a prerequisite for keeping the feast. All of the children of the household could share the Passover meal, even if only the older children could express this question and fully understand their father’s answer.

However, when this feature of the Passover rite is interpreted in the light of the common practice within Judaism, it does suggest that the children of the household participated in a different manner, depending upon their maturity and age. The spiritual significance and benefit of the Passover feast embraced all of the children of Israel, men and women, mature and immature, old and young. No one was excluded from an enjoyment of the covenant privileges that the Passover signified and commemorated.

Nevertheless, in order for all members to benefit from the Passover rite, it was not necessary or obligatory that all directly participated in every aspect of the Passover celebration. Just as the women and younger children were not required to keep the Passover in Jerusalem, though they benefited from its spiritual significance, so the younger children might not have participated in some features of the Passover celebration without being denied their proper place in the covenant community. The fact that some members of the covenant community did not partake of all elements of the Passover meal, or share in every feature of the ritual, would not compromise their place in the covenant community.

And fourth, the historic practice of Judaism does not support the claim of paedocommunionists that all members of Israelite households ordinarily participated in the Passover Feast. Even though there are some features of this practice that are difficult to determine, the mainlines of traditional Jewish practice are clear enough.

In the period of the Old Testament history that follows the first Passover in Egypt, there is no clear biblical evidence that women or children attended the pilgrim Passovers, which were initiated and regulated by the Deuteronomic legislation. Whatever the extent of the participation of children in the first household Passover in Egypt, there are no undisputed examples of women and younger children attending the pilgrim Passovers until about the first century A.D. As we have noted, it is not that women and children were explicitly denied permission to celebrate the Passover.

The stipulation of Deuteronomy 16, that only the men go up annually to Jerusalem to keep the Passover Feast, however, appears to have encouraged a practice in Israel that did not include the participation of women and younger children. The only exceptions to this traditional practice may be the Passovers that were celebrated during the first year of king Hezekiah and the eighteenth year of Josiah (2 Kings 23:21-23; 2 Chronicles 30:1-27).

Josephus, the first century A.D. Jewish historian, claims that the women and children accompanied the men of Israel and attended these Passovers, which were celebrated upon the occasion of the return from exile. The problem with this claim is that it is not corroborated by the sources Josephus uses (Ezra 6:19-22; 1 Esdras 7:10-15), and it may reflect Josephus’ own preference, as a member of the party of the Pharisees, for the inclusion of women and children in the Passover feast. We have no undisputed evidence of the participation of women and younger children in the pilgrim Passovers prior to the intertestamental period.

Only during the intertestamental period do we find any explicit comments about who may properly participate in the Passover Feast. The author of the Book of Jubilees, which was cherished by the Qumran community and written in the late second century A.D., describes a practice in which men from twenty years of age and older participated in the Passover in Jerusalem (Jubilees 49:17). The description of the Passover practice in Jubilees probably reflects the traditional practice of Judaism until at least the end of the second century B.C.

In the post-exilic period, there was considerable emphasis upon the need for the children of Israel to keep scrupulously the requirements of the law of the covenant. Questions were raised regarding which laws were to be kept by men in distinction from those that were to be kept by women. Within the framework of reflection upon Israel's obligations under the law of the covenant, the view prevailed that the commandments became binding upon men at the age of twenty, the age of maturity in terms of particular covenant obligations (cf. Leviticus 27:1-7; Numbers 1:3, 20, 22, 24; 26:2; 1 Chronicles 27:23; Numbers 14:19-21; Exodus 30:14; 38:26). Since the law did not obligate women and younger children to keep the Passover feast, the practice of Judaism in this period did not include their participation.

In the period of the second Temple and post-exilic Judaism, a change of practice is discernable some time after the end of the second century B.C. With the emergence of the sect of the Pharisees, whose teaching is reflected in the Mishnah (c. 180 A.D.), the age at which a member of the covenant community could "*keep the commandments*" was determined to be thirteen. This was the age of discretion at which children of the covenant could partake of the Passover for the first time. In Luke's account of Jesus' going up to Jerusalem with his parents for the first time at the age of twelve (Luke 2:41, 42), this change in practice (from the age of twenty to thirteen) is likely reflected.

At the age of twelve, a child of the covenant would begin the fast in preparation for eating the Passover meal for the first time at the age of thirteen. During this period, some controversy arose within different parties of Judaism regarding the permissibility and the extent to which women and children could participate in all the elements of the Passover feast. By the end of the first century A.D., after the destruction of the second Temple and the return to a household celebration of the Passover, the participation of women and children in the Passover appears to have become more common, though not altogether uncontroversial.

What this brief summary of the history of Jewish practice teaches us is that the inclusion of women and younger children in the Passover feast was not the characteristic pattern in the Old Testament economy. The practice of Israel during the Old Testament era was largely shaped by the provisions in the law for keeping the pilgrim Passover annually in Jerusalem, not the household Passover in Egypt. Only circumcised males were required to keep the Passover Feast, and preparations for the Feast included fasting and the ceremonial cleansing (cf. Numbers 9:6; John 18:28) of the pilgrim celebrants.

In the traditions of Judaism, an "age of discretion" was stipulated for those who kept the Passover. Whether that age was twenty, as in the period prior to the first century A.D., or thirteen, as in the period that coincides with the New Testament's writing, it was not the practice of Judaism prior to the destruction of the second Temple to encourage the participation of younger children who were not yet "*sons of the commandment*" or obliged to keep all of the laws of the covenant. While it appears that the participation of women and children began to be encouraged after the destruction of the temple and a return to a household celebration of the Passover, this was not the typical practice of Israel during the Old Testament era.

If our observations about the Old Testament Passover are given their proper due, the typical appeal that advocates of paedocommunion make to the alleged precedent of the participation of children in this Old Testament rite is not persuasive. Even without considering the differences between the Old Testament Passover and the New Testament Lord's Supper, the Old Testament itself does not teach what some paedocommunionists allege that it does. So far as the participation of younger children in the Passover Feast is concerned, the best that a paedocommunionist can argue is that they may have been permitted to partake of some elements of the Passover meal. In

the Old Testament legislation regarding the annual pilgrim Passovers, women and children are not expressly forbidden to keep the Passover feast. But the implicit permission granted to women and perhaps younger children to participate in the Passover hardly constitutes a strong precedent for the kind of bold claims that often characterize the writings of paedocommunionists.

There is nothing in the teaching of the Old Testament that would warrant the claim, for example, that non-participation in the Passover meal on the part of a covenant member is tantamount to a loss of full communion with the Lord of the covenant or a form of spiritual malnourishment. Though the spiritual benefit of the Passover feast extended to the entire covenant community, this does not seem to have required anything like the paedocommunionist insistence that all members of the covenant community (with the possible exception of unweaned infants) ought to participate in all elements of the Passover meal.

Even on the most congenial reading of the Old Testament evidence, therefore, the case for paedocommunion is hardly supported by an appeal to the analogy of the Passover. As we have seen, the likeliest reading of the biblical and intertestamental evidence within Judaism, is that only “mature” members of the covenant community kept the Passover feast.

For most of Israel’s history prior to the New Testament epoch, only mature males of a specified age participated in the Passover practices that were shaped by the Deuteronomic legislation. Nothing in this history comes close to setting a precedent for a new covenant practice that would require the immediate participation of every covenant member in the Lord’s Supper, regardless of their age or maturity in faith. And yet this is the kind of claim that paedocommunionists are apt to make.

A more likely reading of the traditional Passover practice in Israel shows that it may actually provide a precedent for the Christian church’s communion practice. Just as those who participated in the Passover were expected to prepare themselves for a responsible keeping of the feast (a kind of Old Testament “profession of faith”), so those who participate in the Lord’s Supper are expected to prepare themselves for the kind of communion with Christ that it represents.

Of course, this still leaves open the question whether the Lord’s Supper should be viewed on such close analogy to the Passover. In our treatment of the New Testament evidence respecting paedocommunion, we will argue that this analogy, though valid, can easily be overdrawn. So far as our tentative conclusion here is concerned, we may even grant the paedocommunion emphasis upon the close analogy between the Passover and the Lord’s Supper. What we may not grant is that this analogy provides a strong argument for the admission of all covenant children to the Lord’s Table. A more plausible reading of the evidence would conclude that the Passover sets a precedent for the historic insistence that Christian believers profess their faith in order to be properly received at the Lord’s Table, which has been given for the strengthening of such faith.

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