

# BIBLICAL Theology

## *The Feast of Passover - Leviticus 23:5*

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For over 400 years the children of Israel languished in servitude in Egypt. In the fullness of time, God appeared to Moses in the wilderness with instructions to return to Egypt to delivering His people from bondage. When Moses returned, God sent a series of plagues on Egypt. With each plague, God hardened the heart of Pharaoh. This climaxed with the Tenth Plague - the death of the firstborn (Exodus 4:22-23; 11:4-8). Exodus 11:5 clear states that this death sentence is on all the firstborn, not just the Egyptians. However, God provided a way of escape through the shedding of the blood of a lamb. All who applied the blood and were ready to leave Egypt behind would escape death. For some 3,500 years, Jews around the world have celebrated this event with the keeping of Passover.

### *The Institution of Passover*

The term 'Passover' (פסח - *pasah*) is derived from a Egyptian term which means 'to spread wings over'.<sup>1</sup> The term is used of a bird spreading its wings to protect its young (Isaiah 31:5; cf. Luke 13:34).<sup>2</sup> The Passover, which marked the Jews release from bondage, also marked a new beginning. From this point forward, their means of reckoning time was changed. They were to establish the month of their deliverance as the first month of their new calendar. The first month of their new calendar was *Abib* (later called *Nisan*) and corresponds with March/April of the Gregorian calendar (which is in use today). The name *Nisan* means 'their flight'; a reference to their former exodus from Egypt.<sup>3</sup> The beginning of each Jewish month would be marked by the New Moon Feast.

The Hebrews observed Passover as a memorial, which God instructed them to rehearse and retell annually (Exodus 12:14; 25-27, 42; 13:8). The term 'observe' (שמר - *shamar*) means 'to keep watch every year'.<sup>4</sup> For the Israelite, a memorial authenticated important events (i.e. the stone altar on the side of the Jordan River). Such 'landmarks' stood as perpetual reminders of God's holiness and grace in past ages. The Passover feast was not a geographical landmark, but a supernatural landmark of their deliverance from bondage and God's promise to keep His covenant with them. It is this truth that fathers must tell their children each Passover.<sup>5</sup>

The sacrifice of a lamb was significant in Egyptian society. The lamb was the physical symbol of their pagan god, *Amon*, whose name means 'hidden one'. He was the king of the gods, the source of all life in heaven and earth. As well, *Abib* or *Nisan* was the chief month of *Amon*, who was said

to be at the apex of his power on the full moon. Further, the Egyptians were not to touch a lamb, let alone to let it into the house.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the Passover sacrifice was a direct affront to the chief of the Egyptian gods.

The whole congregation was to keep the feast of Passover (Exodus 12:47) and all the men were to appear before the Lord (Exodus 23:17; 34:23).<sup>7</sup> No stranger (i.e. uncircumcised one) was allowed to eat the Passover (Exodus 12:43-45). If a Gentile wanted to participate they would have to convert and bear the sign of conversion (i.e. circumcision of the flesh). The Passover could only be held at the place appointed by God (Deuteronomy 16:5-6).

The second Passover which the Israelites kept was on the one year anniversary of their deliverance from Egypt as narrated in Numbers 9:1-9. However, during the next 40 years of wandering, there is no record of the people of God celebrating the Passover. This was due to the inability to perform circumcisions in the wilderness (Joshua 5:7-9). The next time the Passover was kept was under the leadership of Joshua after the Israelites crossed the Jordan and entering the land (Joshua 5:10-12). After the leadership of Joshua, the keeping of Passover all but ceased (2 Kings 23:22). In fact, the Scripture records only two other times when the Passover was observed before the exile: during the days of King Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 30) and King Josiah (2 Chronicles 35:1-17).

During the post-exilic period, the keeping of Passover resumed (Ezra 6:19-20). Over the next several centuries, the Passover celebration was expanded, though it did not lose its essential parts. During the first and second century AD, the *Mishnah* was written. It contains writings and instructions on all issues of Jewish life and culture. In particular, it outlines the seder, which means the order of services for the Passover.<sup>8</sup> According to the *Mishnah* in *Pesachim* 10:5, Rabbi Gamaliel says, "Whoever does not make mention of the following three things on Passover has not fulfilled his obligation; namely, the Passover sacrifice, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs. The Passover sacrifice because the Holy One ... passed over the houses of our fathers in Egypt; unleavened bread ... because our fathers were redeemed from Egypt; the bitter herb ... because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our fathers in Egypt."<sup>9</sup>

After the destruction of Herod's Temple by Titus in AD 70, the Passover was altered. With the removal of the Temple, the sacrifice of the lambs became impossible. The Law states that only qualified priests could sacrifice the lambs at the place God deemed for sacrifice (Numbers 9:2-3; Deuteronomy 16:2-6). For the last 2,000 years, no lamb has been eaten as part of the Passover meal. Instead, Rabbis have deemed that the Unleavened Bread (*matzah*) could be eaten as a substitute.<sup>10</sup>

### ***The Observance of Passover***

The Jews referred to *Nisan* 10th as the Great Sabbath.<sup>11</sup> It was on this day that the head of the household was to select a year old lamb and mark it for death (Exodus 12:3, 5). If a family did not have a lamb or could not afford to purchase one, they could eat the Passover under their neighbor's roof so long as none of the meat left the house (Exodus 12:3-4, 46). This lamb was to be watched for four days to insure that it was perfect (Exodus 12:4; Deuteronomy 15:21). By the fourth day, the family (and particularly the children) were attached to the lamb. Take note of the personalization of the lamb in Exodus 12:3-5. Verse 3 says, 'take a lamb'. There was nothing out

of the ordinary about this lamb. Verse 4 says, 'for the lamb'. The lamb has now been set apart from the rest for a purpose. Verse 5 says, 'your lamb'. The lamb is now fully identified with the family for which it will be killed.<sup>12</sup>

As the Passover observances expanded, two major events were added to the day. First, special prayers were offered. These prayers rehearsed the nation's redemption from Egypt, God's love for the nation, and the nation's obligation to keep the Passover. Second, Malachi 3:1-4:6 would be read and the priest would present a discourse on this text.<sup>13</sup>

Beginning on *Nisan* 13th, the head of the house would begin the process of making preparation for the Passover as noted in John 19:14. This preparation involved cleansing the house of leaven by candlelight.<sup>14</sup> While leaven is bitter and sour tasting, it was used in everyday cooking to cause the dough to rise. For the next seven days the house was to remain leaven free (Exodus 13:6-7).

*Nisan* 14th continued the preparation for Passover. Leviticus 23:5-7 refers to this day as the 'First Day of Passover'. It is a 'holy convocation' and all work ceased from morning till noon. As well, no leaven was to be eaten after 12:00 PM. On this day, all Jewish males over the age of twenty and physically able were to appear with an offering (Exodus 23:15; Deuteronomy 16:16-17). Women were not required to appear, but they were not excluded if they did (1 Samuel 1:7; Luke 2:41-42). Those begin the firstborn observed a fast called the *Ta'anit Bechorim*. This fact commemorated the fact of the firstborn being spared from the 10th plague.<sup>15</sup>

On this day, the lambs were slaughtered between the evenings (Exodus 12:16).<sup>16</sup> The lamb was to be slaughtered in such a manner that not one bone would be broken (Exodus 12:46) and then sacrificed by the door of the house in view of the whole family. Each lamb sacrificed was to represent no less than ten people and no more than twenty. The head of the group (family or community) would present himself on their behalf at the Temple. With the construction of the Tabernacle (and later the Temple), the lambs were slain in the courtyard of the sanctuary. After it was killed, the fat would be removed and burned with fire, the rest of the meat was then roasted with fire. The entire lamb was to eaten that evening; anything left was to be burned (Exodus 12:10).

Exodus 12:7 states that the blood of the lamb was drained into a basin at the bottom of the door. The term 'basin' comes from the Egyptian concept of 'sap' as in the kind found in a tree. When used in relation to the thresh-hold of the door this would be a small ditch dug in front of the door to prevent flooding.<sup>17</sup> A brush made of hyssop would then be used to apply the blood to the lintel (top of the door) and then to the side posts of the door. In essence, the door became sealed on all four sides by the blood. The blood served as a mark of identification (Ezra 9:4-6; Revelation 7:2-3).

From the Temple era through the time of Christ, the Israelites would gather in the outer-courtyard of the Temple. At the signal of the silver trumpets sounded by the priest, the lambs would be slain. The blood of the sacrifice would be caught in bowls. It would then be passed down through two rows of priests to be poured out at the base of the altar.<sup>18</sup> The Levitical choir chanted the *Hallel* Psalms (113-118). The congregation would join in by repeating the first line of each psalm after it was sung. The congregation would then chant the words 'Hallelu Yah' (i.e. 'praise ye the LORD') at the end of each line of the *Hallel*. When the choir came to Psalm 118 the congregation repeated verses 25-26,<sup>19</sup> which reads, "*Save now, I beseech thee, O Lord: O Lord, I*

*beseech thee, send now prosperity. Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the Lord: We have blessed you out of the house of the Lord."*

The Passover lamb would be eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Each person at the table ate the bitter herbs until tears came.<sup>20</sup> This reminded them of their bitter treatment and the tears brought about by the Egyptian bondage. Initially, the people were to eat with their loins girded, staff in hand, and wearing their sandals (Exodus 12:11). However, during the post-exilic era, the meal would be eaten in a reclining position (Luke 22:14; John 13:23-25).<sup>21</sup>

With the destruction of the Temple, sacrifices ceased and for the last 2,000 years, the Jews have set the table with the bare shank-bone of a lamb, and a roasted egg.<sup>22</sup> The bare shank-bone replaced the lamb and the roasted egg commemorated the sacrifice.

Four particular cups were drunk during the meal. The first cup was the Cup of Sanctification. This cup would set the feast apart from other common meals. The second cup was the Cup of Plagues, a reminder of the judgment that had fallen on the Egyptians. The third cup was the Cup of Redemption, a memorial of the Israel's redemption. The last cup was the Cup of Praise, which signified the end of the meal.<sup>23</sup>

At the beginning of the Passover meal, the head of the family or host recited the '*kiddush*' (i.e. a prayer or blessing) over the first cup of red wine to consecrate it to God (Luke 22:17-18). This was followed by the first ceremonial hand washing by the host (John 13:4-5). The servants then brought in portable food tables and the first dipping of food would begin. The first dipping included taking the raw vegetables (usually lettuce; in those days considered a bitter herb) and dipping it in saltwater and vinegar. The bitter herbs were passed to everyone at the table. After the eating of the herbs the food was removed.

Next, the second cup of wine was poured, but not consumed. This prompted the youngest person in the room to ask four questions: 1) Why is this night different from all other nights? On all other nights we can eat matzo, why not tonight?; 2) On all other nights, we can eat any kind of herb, why tonight do we eat bitter herbs?; 3) On all other nights, we do not dip the herbs into anything, why tonight do we dip twice?; 4) On all other nights we eat meat roasted, stewed or boiled, why tonight do we only eat roasted meat?<sup>24</sup> The head of the house then gave a synopsis of Israel's history from Abraham's call to the giving of the Law. Following this, the food was returned to the table. The head or host then explained the meaning of the lamb, the bitter herbs and the unleavened bread. The group then sang the first part of the *Hallel* (Psalm 113-114). After singing, the second cup of wine was consumed.

The head of the house washed his hands again before touching the unleavened bread, which was eaten with the Passover Meal and then for the next seven days (*Nisan* 15th-21st). The bread would be broken and blessed by the head or host (John 13:26-27, 30). The blessing contained two parts: 1) Thanksgiving to God for providing the bread; 2) Thanksgiving for the command to eat the bread. The host gave each person a piece of bread dipped in the bitter herbs and *charoseth* mixture. *Charoseth* was a sweet mixture of apples and nuts and was a peace offering made at the Passover and other feasts.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, the lamb was eaten. If there was not enough lamb to share with everyone present, they would eat of the *Hagiagah* first. The *Hagiagah* was a sheep, goat or oxen that had been used in a peace offering. Again, it was consumed prior to the lamb, so that lamb was eaten last.

A third cup of wine was poured after the supper. A blessing was given for the cup and then it was consumed (1 Corinthians 11:25). The second portion of the *Hallel* (Psalm 115-118) was sung. A fourth cup of wine was poured and drunk. The dinner was ended with a closing hymn which began with, "All thy works shall praise thee, Jehovah, our God" and ended with "from everlasting to everlasting thou art God, and beside Thee, we have no King, Redeemer or Savior" (Matthew 26:30).<sup>26</sup>

### ***The Fulfillment of Passover***

Jesus celebrated the Feast of Passover and established the Lord's Supper while partaking of His final Passover meal before the cross (Matthew 26:18-20). The Passover is full of symbolism as demonstrated by Christ that night in the Upper Room with His disciples. The symbolism is seen as follows:

The night that the Israelites ate the Passover, they were to have their loins girded, staff in hand and their sandals on in preparation for leaving behind Egypt. In this event, we see the foreshadowing of the act of repentance. This teaches that an individual can claim the blood of the Lamb, but if they do not leave behind Egypt, which is a picture of sin and worldliness, they will not see the Promised Land whose spiritual significance is the Kingdom of Heaven.

While God's holiness demands that God must judge sin; God's mercy demands that God provides a way to escape. Pharaoh's rejection of God's command was an affront to God's holiness. God's holiness needed to be vindicated and, therefore, God sent the angel of death throughout the land of Egypt to slaughter the firstborn (Exodus 12:29; Hebrews 11:28). The Passover was God's provision of mercy. This provision involved a substitutionary death - the lamb for the firstborn (Exodus 12:3, 6-7, 12-13). Like Pharaoh's response, mankind's rejection of the Creator is an affront to God's holiness (Romans 1:18-25). God's holiness still must be vindicated and, therefore, humanity has been judged with death and separation from God in Hell. However, the crucifixion of the Messiah was God's provision of mercy to the whole world. It, too, involved a substitutionary death - the Lamb of God (John 1:29) who was also the firstborn son of Mary (Matthew 1:25; Luke 2:7). He died in humanity's place. His blood covered sin so that God's wrath would 'pass over' all those who repent and believe by accepting Him as personal Lord and Savior (Romans 4:7-8; 1 Peter 1:19; Mark 1:15).

The picture of the blood applied to the door points to the cross some 1400 years prior to the actual event. The lentil above points to the crown of thorns which was mashed into the head of the Messiah. The blood dripping down from the lentil pictures the blood dripping down the face of Christ. The blood-stained posts to the right and left of the door picture the nails that pierced Messiah's wrists. The basin at the thresh-hold pictures the nails that pierced Messiah's feet and the blood that pooled at the foot of the cross.<sup>27</sup> Christ is the Door - singular! That means He is the only means of access to the Father (John 10:9).

Forty years before the Temple was destroyed (AD 70), Christ claimed to be the fulfillment of the Passover when He stated 'This is my body... this is my blood'. In those two acts, He applied the bread and wine of the meal to Himself. In the Middle-Eastern culture, 'bread' is considered to be the 'staff of life'.<sup>28</sup> In other words, 'bread' is symbolic of the provisions man needs to live. The unleavened bread symbolized the sinlessness and purity of the Messiah. The bread was eaten with

bitter herbs, which symbolized the bitter sorrow that comes with knowing that one's sin sent the spotless Lamb of God to the cross. Man is dead in trespasses and sins and needs the provision of Christ's life to secure eternal life (Ephesians 2:1-5).

In Jewish tradition, a cup of wine was symbolic of blood. As well, blood was the seal of covenants made between two parties.<sup>29</sup> Christ stated, "this cup is the new testament [*covenant*] in my blood" (Luke 22:20).<sup>30</sup> That cup represents symbolically the shed blood of Christ that inaugurated and sealed this new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34). It was the third cup of the meal, the cup of redemption that took on this new meaning!

Christ as the sacrifice is the fulfillment of the Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:17) The Passover lamb was marked for death, so Christ was marked for death (Isaiah 53:7; 1 Peter 1:19-20; Revelation 5:6-12). The Passover lamb died as a substitute, so Christ died as a substitute (Exodus 12:3; John 1:29). The Passover lamb was to be flawless, so Christ was flawless (Exodus 12:5; Deuteronomy 15:21; John 18:38; Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 1:19). The Passover lamb was roasted with fire, so Christ was roasted with fiery judgment (Isaiah 53; Matthew 27:46; 2 Corinthians 5:21). The Passover lamb's blood had to be shed, so Christ's blood was shed (Exodus 12:21-27; 1 Peter 1:18-19). The Passover lamb was to be killed in a manner so that not one bone was to be broken, so Christ was killed and not one bone was broken (Exodus 12:3; Psalm 34:20; John 19:36). Christ is the Passover Lamb and will be worshiped as such throughout eternity (Revelation 5:12-14).

In the modern Passover Seder, Christ is not foreshadowed but memorialized though Jewish leaders would disagree. With the destruction of the Temple (AD 70) the shank-bone and roasted egg were added to the Seder because of the inability to make sacrifices. What the Jews miss is that the Temple was ultimately destroyed by God, because it was no longer needed. The shank-bone which was substituted represented God's deliverance through the lamb. However, the Lamb of God has been sacrificed and has expiated sin. The roasted egg, which symbolizes the daily sacrifices for forgiveness of sins was fulfilled in Christ's once-for-all sacrifice for sins (Hebrews 10:12).

One other aspect of the modern Seder must also be examined. Following the Temple's destruction, the unleavened bread (מַצּוֹת - matzo) took on a new significance. Three pieces of matzo are placed one on top of the other and separated by napkins. During the meal, the center piece of matzo is removed, broken, wrapped and hidden. Following the drinking of the third cup, the children go looking for the hidden matzo. When it is found, everyone at the table must eat from the broken matzo.<sup>31</sup> This is called the 'afikomen' (afikomeno~). This is the only Greek word in the Seder and is used in the aorist tense so that it can be translated as 'I came'.<sup>32</sup> The three pieces of matzo picture the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The center piece which is removed, broken, wrapped, and hidden, pictures Christ. Christ was 'removed' as He was separated, for a time, from the Godhead on the cross (Matthew 27:46). Christ was 'broken' as His body suffered on the cross. Christ was 'wrapped' as His body was prepared for burial. Christ was 'hidden' as His body was placed in the tomb. Furthermore, the afikomen occurs after the third glass, pointing to Christ being risen after the third day.

### ***Conclusion:***

The Passover was a time for the Jews to look back at God's holiness and grace in providing an escape from bondage. Just as the Israelites who passed through the blood stained door found

safety, so all who pass through the blood of Christ are saved from eternal damnation. Jesus called Himself the door, and declared that all who enter find safety (John 10:9). While the blood of bulls and goats could not remove the sin of humanity (Hebrews 10:4), the blood of Christ guarantees an once-for-all remission of sin and the blotting out of the transgressions of all who repent (Colossians 1:14; 2:13-14; Hebrews 11:12).

Jesus Christ is not only the door, He is the Passover Lamb. He is the Unique One, that God Himself provided in man's place (Genesis 22:8; Hebrews 9:28). He is God in the flesh, sent from the Father to redeem man from the marketplace of sin and enslavement to the world and the Devil. Unless an individual appropriates the Lamb of God as his sacrifice he is still lost in his sins (Galatians 2:20). All who have Jesus as their Savior and Lord are partakers of the New Covenant and have undergone the circumcision of the heart (Jeremiah 31:31-35; Romans 2:28-29; Ephesians 2:12-19).

When believers celebrate the Lord's Supper, they are continuing the keeping of the Passover because 'Christ our Passover was slain' (1 Corinthians 5:17). The Passover Feast was an illustration (Hebrews 10:1) divinely designed to expose sin and point humanity to the reality of Christ's answer to man's sin problem. When Christ came He exposed sin and became the sacrificial Lamb. Though Christ has altered the Passover celebration by fulfilling it and giving it deeper meaning, believers must give sacred consideration of their freedom from the bondage of sin each time they partake of the Lord's Supper.

### **Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> Rosen, C., & Rosen, M. (2006). Christ in the Passover: Why is this night different?. (p 27). Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers.

<sup>2</sup> Pink, A. W. Gleanings in Exodus. (p 93). Chicago, IL: Moody Press.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, Keven (2000). The Holidays of God: The Spring Feasts. (p 5) Grand Rapids, MI: RBC Ministries.

<sup>4</sup> Rosen, C., & Rosen, M. (p 43).

<sup>5</sup> Williams, Keven (p 6).

<sup>6</sup> Williams, Keven (p 7).

<sup>7</sup> Israel My Glory : Volume 50 Issue 2. 1999. Passover (p 5) Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc.

<sup>8</sup> Rosen, C., & Rosen, M. (p 62).

<sup>9</sup> Williams, Keven (p 8).

<sup>10</sup> Originally, Nisan 10 fell on the Sabbath (seventh day). Each successive Passover celebration continued to refer to Nisan 10 as the Great Sabbath regardless of the weekday on which it fell. This was the day when the lambs would be selected for slaughter. Barnes, Charles R. (1924). The People's Bible Encyclopedia, (p 357). Chicago. The People's Publication Society.

<sup>11</sup> Rosen, C., & Rosen, M. (p 33).

<sup>12</sup> Barnes, Charles R. (1924). The People's Bible Encyclopedia, (p 358) Chicago. The People's Publication Society.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. (p 358).

<sup>14</sup> [www.biblelight.net/feasts.htm](http://www.biblelight.net/feasts.htm) (retrieved May 28, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> According to Karaite Jews the phrase 'between the evenings' meant the time between sunset and darkness. The Pharisees though interpreted the phrase 'between the evenings' meant the time from the beginning of sunset (3:00 PM) until the actual sunset (6:00 PM). Barnes, Charles R. (1924). The People's Bible Encyclopedia, (p 357) Chicago. The People's Publication Society.

<sup>16</sup> Rosen, C., & Rosen, M. (p 62).

<sup>17</sup> Freeman, James M. (1972). Manners and Customs of the Bible, (# 716) Plainfield, NJ. Logos International.

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<sup>18</sup> Rosen, C., & Rosen, M. (p 37).

<sup>19</sup> Rosenthal, Marvin J. (1976). *The Lord's Table in the Light of the Passover*. (p 5) Belmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc.

<sup>20</sup> Rosen, C., & Rosen, M. (p 57).

<sup>21</sup> Barnes, Charles R. (p 359).

<sup>22</sup> Williams, Keven (p 13).

<sup>23</sup> Rosen, C., & Rosen, M. (p 64).

<sup>24</sup> Freeman, James M. (# 716).

<sup>25</sup> Rosen, C., & Rosen, M. (p 64).

<sup>26</sup> Pink, A. W. (p 73).

<sup>27</sup> Williams, Keven (p 12).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* (p. 13).

<sup>29</sup> The term διαθήκη (diatheke) translated in Luke 22:20 can be defined as 'covenant'. Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed.) (p 228). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>30</sup> Rosenthal, Marvin. J. (p 7).

<sup>31</sup> Rosenthal, Marvin. J. (p 8).