

The Passover | Leviticus 23:1-2, 4-8 | 7 July 2019

The Passover Feast has had a long history beginning with the celebratory inauguration of the people of God being freed from the bondage of Egyptian slavery and continued to this day, both in Jewish and Christian circles, generation by generation.

In Exodus 12 we have the description of the Passover, portions of which follow:

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt... every man shall take a lamb according to their father's houses, a lamb for a household... Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.

Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it... In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the Lord's Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night... I will execute judgments; I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you.

This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast.

N.T. Wright provides a good synopsis of the reason for this special Feast in his book *The Day the Revolution Began*.

Jews of the first century, like a great many Jews in the twenty-first century, organized their lives around the major festivals and holy days. Among the festivals, incomparably the greatest was Passover, which commemorated the time when, in the book of Exodus, Israel's God had acted dramatically to break the power of Pharaoh of Egypt and to set free his previously enslaved people. The whole story is important and was and is rehearsed in detail every Passover; the slavery, the hardship, the plagues on Pharaoh and his nation, the judgment on the firstborn of Egypt (and the protection of the Israelites through the blood of the Passover lambs), the crossing of the Red Sea, the journey in the wilderness, the giving of the Law (the Torah) on Mt. Sinai, and the construction of the tabernacle. We have every reason to suppose that when the Jewish people celebrated Passover year after year they thought of it as the freedom festival that not only looked back to the original act of liberation, but ahead to another great act of liberation, especially when the people once more felt themselves enslaved or oppressed. And the point for our purposes is this: Jesus himself chose Passover as the moment to do what he had to do, and the first Christians looked back to Passover as one of the main interpretative lenses for understanding his death.

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Passover = ***Pascha*** (Greek); ***pasach*** (Hebrew)

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In the New Testament **pascha** denotes (a) the (seven-day) Jewish feast of the Passover. (b) Only rarely does it have a narrower sense and on the basis of OT usage denote the actual Passover (held on the night of the 15th Nisan). (c) As in the OT it may then be used for the Passover lamb slain at mid-day on the 14th Nisan in the forecourt of the temple at Jerusalem and then eaten after sundown. (d) In Christian usage Easter is called **pascha**, and figuratively (from the time of Luke 22:15 f.) the term can also be used for the “eschatological banquet,” from the time of Marcion [2nd century]) for the “Lord’s Supper,” and for the **Parousia** (the second Advent). 897

In the Gospels the Passover is the setting of several stories. The boy Jesus visits the temple during the Passover pilgrimage, Lk 2:41-51. Underlying the feeding of the multitude (Mk 6:32-44; 8:1-9) there probably lies a meeting between Jesus and a procession of Galilean pilgrims. The violence exerted by Pilate against Galilean visitors to the temple (Lk 13:1-3 took place on the occasion of one of the three pilgrimages, probably the Passover. In particular, the background of the Passover is essential for an understanding of the passion narrative. Finally, it was during the Passover that both James the son of Zebedee (Ac 12:1-4, 44 A.D.) and James the Lord’s brother suffered martyrdom in Jerusalem. 899

The Passover Meal, which in distinction from ordinary meals began only after sunset and lasted long into the night, had to be eaten within the walls of Jerusalem. It was enframed in a liturgy whose core was the Passover prayer of the head of the house and the recitation of the Hallel (Ps 113 – 118; cf. Mk 14:26; Mt 26:30). 899

Christ the Passover Lamb. The casual way in which Paul says “For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor 5:7-8), suggests that this comparison was already familiar to the Corinthians church. It is indeed common in the NT (1 Pt 1:19; Jn 1:29, 36; Rev 5:6, 9, 12; 12:11) and probably goes back to Jesus Himself, for, since “body/blood” are sacrificial terms, one may conclude that in the saying at the Lord’s Supper (Mk 14:22-24 and parallels) Jesus was comparing Himself with the paschal lamb, and calling His death a sacrifice. This comparison is the core of a rich Passover typology in the primitive Church. 900

I am captivated with the holistic nature of the Passover from two perspectives. The first, the Passover touches every area of life – bondage, sacrifice, family, feasting, anticipating, preparing, etc.; this point reminds me of God appointing a holy time (convocation, Lev 23:1-2) to gather and celebrate life together. Second, it includes all spheres of time – past, present and future – signifying the importance of each. Past events and experiences that have taken place centuries ago, as well as those we have all have had; the present reality we step into in our daily activities; and lastly, future expectation we need to cultivate and foster as a trajectory toward God’s surprises that are now unknown yet will unfold in the future. I leave you with this thought:

Then Joshua said to the people, “Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you.” Joshua 3:5 [Sounds a lot like Esther Lightcap Meek’s *indeterminate future manifestations*, or IFM.]

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