

Easter And The Jewish Feast of Pasover

Exodus 12:1-28 (Leviticus 23:4-8)

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Introduction: The only appearance of the word "Easter" is in the King James Version of the Bible. The word "Easter" was a mistranslation of a Greek word ("pascha") for "Passover." "Easter was originally a pagan festival honoring Eostre, a Teutonic (Germanic) goddess of light and spring. At the time of the vernal equinox (the day in the spring when the sun crosses the equator and day and night are of equal length), sacrifices were offered in her honor. As early as the eighth century, the name was used to designate the annual Christian celebration of the resurrection of Christ."¹

Easter is celebrated today on the first Sunday following the full moon that occurs on or after March 21st, or one week later if the full moon falls on Sunday. Easter then would occur between March 22th and April 25th.

Historically, during the first three centuries there was a difference between the churches of Alexandria and Rome as to the method of calculating the date of Easter. Since the Council of Nicaea (325AD) the date for Easter has been determined by the Jewish Passover and falls on the Sunday nearest to the 14th Nisan on the Jewish Calander.²

Christians celebrate "Easter" as the resurrection of Jesus Christ. "Easter" is the grand finale to the crucifixion and burial of Jesus. It seems as though "Easter" or at least the crucifixion and death of Christ and the "Passover" have some very close connections. Jesus was offered up on the "Passover" (Mt. 26:2; Jn. 13:1; 19:14). In fact Christ is called the "Passover" Lamb, (1 Cor. 5:7). "Unleavened bread" is used in the memorial of the Lord's Supper, (1 Cor. 11:23-28).

There are times when the media has given a great deal of attention to the Jewish feast of Passover. However, most of the discussion of Passover has centered either on the food or the ethnic character of it. Few people really know what Passover means today. "As Passover is observed by Jews today, it should more properly be called the feast of Unleavened Bread."³ "The Passover was the first of the three great annual feasts of the Hebrew people: the Feast of Passover/Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles. These feasts were very important in the Jewish faith, and every male was expected to observe them."⁴

We may realize the importance of the Passover to Jewish heritage and be challenged spiritually by reviewing four facts about Passover.

1. THE MEANING OF THE PASSOVER Exodus 12:26-27

A. What does the "Passover" mean?

The word "Passover" comes from the Hebrew verb "pasah" meaning "to Passover." Passover "referred to the sacrifice of a lamb in Egypt when the people of Israel were slaves. The Hebrews smeared the blood of the lamb on their doorposts as a signal to God that He should "pass over" their houses when He destroyed all the first born of Egypt to persuade Pharaoh to let His people go."⁵

"The Passover was of supreme theological significance for the Israelites, since it marked one of the most momentous acts of divine intervention in their history, the beginning of their deliverance from bondage in Egypt when, in the final plague, God destroyed the firstborn of the Egyptians but spared those Israelites whose homes had blood smeared on the doorposts."⁶

"By Biblical definition, Passover is a one-day feast that is immediately followed by the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread. Both feasts today are usually combined as a whole and simply called Passover."⁷

B. What does "Passover" not mean?

The Lord's Supper that the Christian Church celebrates is not the same as the Jewish Passover.

"The Lord Jesus clearly stated that 'the (unleavened) bread' was His body and (the content of) 'the cup' was the blood of the New Covenant that was shed for His people (Luke 22:19-20)."⁸

The Christian Church's "Lord's Supper," containing the unleavened bread and cup, are symbols of the Lord's broken body and shed blood on behalf of the sinner, whereas, the Jewish "Passover," containing the paschal lamb and unleavened bread, are symbols of the Jews' deliverance from Egyptian bondage. Christ fulfilled the Law and the feasts of the Jews. With reference to the Passover in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8, "the fulfillment is partly doctrinal ('Christ our Passover') and partly ethical ('the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth')."⁹

2. THE MANNER OF THE PASSOVER Exodus 12:3-10

The first Jewish Passover observation took place as follows:

A. A lamb was involved (verses 3,5-10)

"The six essential requirements to be found in the paschal lamb were: a lamb without blemish; a lamb that was tested; the lamb slain; the blood to be applied; the blood a perfect propitiation against divine judgments; the lamb partaken of as food."¹⁰

B. The family was involved (verses 3,4,6)

Everyone in the whole congregation of Israel was to partake. Each man was responsible to have a lamb for his family. If the family was too small they were to join another family. The family and the neighbor played a great importance in Jewish religious life.

C. A meal involved (verses 8-10)

The Jews were to roast the lamb. They were not to eat it raw or boiled. In the evening they were to eat the lamb with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. There were to be no left-overs. Any left-overs were to be burned.

D. An activity was involved (verse 7, 22-23)

Before they ate the lamb in the evening, they were to strike the door posts with the blood from the lamb. This was a sign to the destroyer to pass over the house (verse 23)

E. A length of time was involved (verses 15-16)

The Passover was to last seven days. The first day of the feast and the last day of the feast were very special days. No one was to work on those days.

3. THE MEMORIAL OF THE PASSOVER Exodus 12:14

A. The special place of the feast verses 14,17,24,43

This was a very special feast which God said would be both a memorial (verse 14) and an ordinance (14,17,24,43). A memorial (Heb. 'zikkaron') "is an object or act which brings something else to mind or which represents something else. As such it may be a memorial, a reminder, a historical record, or a physical token, which calls to mind a deity."¹¹

An ordinance (Heb. 'huqqa') "refers to enacting a decree.... and is used... to designate an ordinance from God which is perpetually binding."¹²

Passover was to be taught to all the present generations and to continually be taught to generations to come.

It was to be observed from sunset of the fourteenth to the twenty-first day of the first month, Exodus 23:15; 34:18. The month of Abib "is the Canaanite name of the Hebrew month Nisan, about mid-March to Mid-April."¹³

B. A few changes over the years

Approximately 2 years after the Exodus, Moses gave more instruction concerning the feast of the Passover, Numbers 9:1-14.

Approximately 40 years after the Exodus Moses added offerings to the feast of Passover, Numbers 28:16-25. There was to be more cleansing and preparation in the observance of the Passover.

"At the first institution the participants stood, in later times they reclined. Other minor features were introduced: four successive cups of wine mixed with water, to which there is no reference in the law; singing of Psalms 113-118; a dish of fruits reduced with vinegar to the consistency of lime as a reminder of the mortar used during the Egyptian bondage."¹⁴

4. THE MAINTAINING OF THE PASSOVER

A. Keeping clean for Passover Numbers 9:1-14

Moses needed to give more instruction for Passover as time progressed. "The reason for the new Passover instructions was to address the problem of any who for some reason might be unable to celebrate the festival at the designated time.

Specifically, in this situation some of the people were ineligible to take part because they had become ceremonially unclean."¹⁵ The Jews had a difficult time maintaining purity for the Passover.

B. Remembering the importance of the Passover Deuteronomy 16:1-8

Moses rehearsed what God wanted before they entered the land. It is easy to forget what the Lord requires of us. The Jewish nation would be tempted to forget what God had done for them in Egypt, once they occupied the Land that God gave to them.

C. Staying committed to the Passover 2 Chronicles 30:1,3,13,15

Hezekiah brought a great revival to the Southern Kingdom. This account takes place approximately 5 to 7 years (715bc) after the Northern Kingdom was taken into captivity (722bc).

Over the years sin caused the Jewish nation to be apathetic, lethargic, and uncommitted to the things of the Lord.

Conclusion: Christians today are not required to observe Passover because of two reasons: one is that Christians are not Jews and secondly, the Church was never told to observe it.

The Christians were given a new memorial called the Lord's Supper. The church celebrates the Lord's Supper remembering Christ's death. Though the Church does not celebrate Passover, we can still respect what the Lord has done for Israel and learn great spiritual blessing from the Biblical account.

References:

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- ⁷Kevin Howard, "Focus On Passover" Zion's Hope, p. 11.
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- ¹²Harris, Vol. 1, p. 316-317.
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