

# Understanding the \*Pesach in its Jewish Context

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## *The Pesach and the breaking of bread in context*

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*Exodus 12:1-14, Matthew 26:17-30, Mark 14:12-26, Luke 22:7-20, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26*

### KEY SCRIPTURES

*\*Pesach is the Hebrew word for the Supper and will be used here to stress the Jewish origin of the event.*

## Introduction

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Many Christians would claim to fully know what the Supper in the upper room is about. Unfortunately, it is one of the most familiar passages in the Scriptures, that is most often not really understood. This is because it is approached with a Western, Gentile mind, that has been influenced by Greek thinking. Or it has been appropriated as a church centred religious ceremony. In doing this, it removes the supper from the Jewish history and contextual setting. It separates it from anything that came before it. It overlooks the fact that Yeshua – Jesus – was a Jewish teacher bringing home to His disciples what was about to happen. It was, in fact, the realisation of a new understanding of the fulfilment of the Jewish prophet Jeremiah's words. It is therefore important that we do not miss what was actually happening in that upper room. Jesus was communicating to His disciples, in a way that they, as Jewish men, would understand. They had participated in the annual celebration of the Pesach from their birth. He was shining a light on His being the Pesach Lamb and the bread from heaven. They would have had some inkling of what the Messiah was doing immediately and profoundly. It is certain John grasped this as we see in his Gospel account.

The upper room supper, is wrongly called the last supper. That last supper will be the banquet held when the marriage of the Lamb is celebrated. This supper shared before His death must be read correctly, as a commemorative Jewish meal, that was being given a new application. That is, that it was a Pesach Seder, in which Jesus was central to the new awakening to come. When we then approach it as such a Jewish event, the words and

actions of Jesus take on a greater depth. It reveals great truth that cannot be gained from a Western understanding.

***1 Corinthians 5:7*** *“Then clean out the old leaven [corruption] so that you may be a new lump, just as you are unleavened [uncorrupted]. For our Pesach is Messiah who was sacrificed for our sake.”*

## The Pesach — Its Origins and Structure

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Exodus 12 recounts the historical Pesach and it is there we find its origin. It tells how God delivered Israel from their slavery in Egypt. The final plague - the death of the firstborn - would bring the Angel of Death on all the first born. This meant everyone including the Hebrews if they did not act on God's Word. To ensure they were not included in the death, every Israelite household was commanded to sacrifice an unblemished lamb and put its blood to the doorposts of their home. They then ate the roasted lamb with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, in readiness for a speedy departure. This required the Hebrews to have faith in God's word through Moses. It is a great lesson to all who wish to escape eternal death. That is to have faith in God's Word.

***John 5:24*** *“Truly, truly, I say to you, He who hears My Word and believes on Him who sent Me has everlasting life and shall not come into condemnation, but has passed from death to life.”*

We see the word of God is clear to the Hebrews:

***Exodus 12:13-14*** “*And the blood shall be a sign to you, on the houses where you are. And I will see the blood, and I will pass over you. And the plague shall not be on you to destroy, when I strike in the land of Egypt. And the day shall be a memorial for you. And you shall celebrate it as a feast to YAHWEH, for your generations. You shall celebrate it as a law forever.*”

Here we see both the means of deliverance and the command to the annual memorial of Pesach.

The Pesach must not be seen as merely an historical commemoration. The *\*Mishnah* in tractate *Pesachim* records that every Jewish person in every generation is obligated to see themselves as if they personally came out of Egypt. The Seder was a participatory re-enactment of redemption. Every element carried meaning and told part of the story. Again a reflection to everyone who responds to the Gospel, that each must accept their own acceptance of gift of salvation from God.

*\*The Mishnah is the first written collection of the Jewish oral traditions that are known as the Oral Torah.*

Before the ending of the first century, the Pesach Seder had a structured format. The elements were:

1. Four cups of wine, each representing one of the four divine promises of redemption

in Exodus 6:6-7.

2. There was the breaking and hiding of the *afikomen*.
3. There were prayers, psalms, the recitation of the *Haggadah*, bitter herbs, and the Pesach lamb.

## The Four Cups and Their Significance

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The four cups of the Pesach Seder correspond to the four promises God made in Exodus 6:6-7:

1. I will bring you out - the Cup of Sanctification
2. I will deliver you - the Cup of Deliverance
3. I will redeem you - the Cup of Redemption
4. I will take you out - the Cup of Restoration

It is John that points us to the first Cup of Sanctification, that would have been drank:

***John 17:19*** “*And I fear for their sakes. I sanctify myself so that they may also be sanctified by Truth.*”

John also gives us the prayer Jesus prayed for their deliverance, the Cup of Deliverance, to eternal life in glory, through His resurrection:

***John 17:24*** “*Father, those whom You have given to me, I desire that where I am they might also be with me that they might see my glory that you have given to me because you have loved me from before the foundations of the world.*”

When Stephen in Acts speaks of their history, he made this deliverance clear when he says of God, “..I have come down to deliver them [The Jews]..” (Acts 7:34) Moses was sent to deliver them. As Luke tells us Jesus was sent into the world and said, “..He (God) has sent me to proclaim release to the captives...” (Luke 4:18) This great truth is part of the Pesach celebration for us.

It is Mark who points us to the two last cups. The third, the Cup of Redemption, is associated with the blood of the Pesach lamb and the promise: I will redeem you with an outstretched arm:

***Mark 14:24 “And He said to them, this is My blood, that of the New Covenant, which is poured out concerning many.”***

It is important to note again, the Jewishness of what Jesus said. His reference to the New Covenant, was His stating that He was the one ushering in the New Covenant spoken of by Jeremiah:

***Jeremiah 31:31-34 “Behold, days are coming” - it is a declaration of Adonai - “when I will cut a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah - not like the covenant I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they broke My covenant, though I was a husband to them.” - it is a declaration of Adonai. “But this is the covenant I will cut with the house of Israel after those days” - it is a declaration of Adonai - “I will put My***

*Torah within them. Yes, I will write it on their heart. I will be their God and they will be My people. No longer will each teach his neighbour or each his brother, saying: 'Know Adonai,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest." - it is a declaration of Adonai - "For I will forgive their iniquity, their sin I will remember no more."*

The covenant that was cut with Moses, required the sacrifice of animals, whose blood was sprinkled over the people, thus sealing the covenant with blood. Note the reference to cutting the animals – covenants were not 'made' they were 'cut'.

**Exodus 24:7-8** *"He took the Scroll of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. Again they said, "All that Adonai has spoken, we will do and obey." Then Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant, which Adonai has cut with you, in agreement with all these words.""*

The letter to the Hebrews refers to this in chapter nine. The same writer also writes:

**Hebrews 10:29** *"How much more severe do you think the punishment will be for the one who has trampled Ben-Elohim [The Son of God] underfoot, and has regarded as*

*unholy the blood of the covenant by which he was made holy, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?”*

Jesus, in the Cup of Redemption, was indicating that He was sealing the Jeremiah Covenant with His own blood. That promise of this fulfilment, was offered to the Jewish people in His day, and remains open to all who will accept His Messiahship. In His return, Revelation shows us, God will bring to completion, the Promises of Redemption for His chosen people.

The fourth cup - the Cup of Restoration This was not drunk. Mark again tells us this:

**Mark 14:25** *“Amen, I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God.”*

**Revelation 19:9** *“Then the angel tells me, “Write: How fortunate are those who have been invited to the wedding banquet of the Lamb!” He also tells me, “These are the true words of God.”*

Jesus was deliberately leaving the final cup to signify to the Disciples an important promise, to comfort them that what was going to happen was not the end. He was pointing forward to its completion at the messianic banquet. It is Paul who fills in the gap as to when the last cup will be drunk: he writes;

**1 Corinthians 11:26** *“For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until*

*He comes.”*

Though not completely grasped, it would have left them pondering and attempting to understand. Every person at that table knew exactly which cup was being left and its meaning of restoration by the Messiah. Peter was certainly aware of this, though again not fully understanding it. (Matthew 16:16)

## The Bread — Matzah and the Afikomen

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The bread Jesus broke was not ordinary bread. It was *matzah* - unleavened bread - which carried profound theological significance. Leaven in Jewish thought was a symbol of sin and corruption. The removal of all leaven from the household before Pesach was a thorough act of purification. This was commanded as part of Pesach:

***Exodus 12:15*** “*For seven days you are to eat matzot [unleavened bread], but on the first day you must remove hametz [leavened bread] from your houses, for whoever eats hametz from the first day until the seventh day, that soul will be cut off from Israel.*”

Jesus made clear He was the Bread of Life who had come down from heaven. He was without sin and corruption (Hebrews 4:15). The use of *Matzot* was the breaking of uncorrupted bread symbolising His own body, that would not see corruption (Psalm 16:10, Acts 2:27) and would be broken for them.

Central to the Seder is the afikomen, which is a piece of *matzah* that is broken, wrapped in

linen, hidden away, and then found and eaten at the end of the meal. The word afikomen is debated in its etymology - some scholars connect it to a meaning of He who has come or He who is coming. However, the debate on its origin must not distract from the huge significance of the actions of Jesus. There are three *Matzot* breads. The middle one is the one taken and broken. 'This is my body which is broken for you'

The symbolism is astonishing in the light of the gospel. A piece of bread is broken. It is wrapped. It is hidden. Think about this. It is the second *Mazot*. The first day – crucified. The second day Jesus' body was in the tomb. It was wrapped in linen and 'hidden'. Then in the meal, it is brought back - Jesus was raised on the third day. It is the final taste of the meal. That is the taste that lingers, after the meal, and no wine is drunk. Every one of the Disciples would have thought immediately of the afikomen, something they would have seen enacted every Pesach of their lives.

## Haggadah, Maror, and the Pesach lamb.

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The *Haggadah* was the retelling of the Exodus account. This may have been done at the upper room meal or, as I see it, Jesus was retelling it using the emblems as discussed above. The *Maror* are the bitter herbs that are tasted at the Pesach. This was to remind them of the suffering in Egypt:

***Exodus 1:13-14*** *“They worked them harshly, and made their lives bitter with hard labour with mortar and brick, doing all sorts of work in the fields. In all their labours they worked them with cruelty.”*

Thinking of the bitterness suffered by the Hebrews in Egypt, brings to mind the great suffering of Jesus the Messiah. As He knelt in the garden before His death, we read:

***Luke 22:44 “And in His anguish, He was praying fervently; and His sweat was like drops of blood falling down on the ground.”***

We must not dismiss this as hyperbole. It shows the immense stress of the suffering that Jesus was to face. There is in fact medical evidence of cases of sweating blood - hematidrosis. This is the medical description:

*People who have hematidrosis may sweat blood from their skin. It usually happens on or around the face, but it can also come from the mucosa inside the nose, mouth, or stomach. The skin around the bloody area may swell temporarily. Crying tears of blood is related. It's called hemolacria. Bleeding from the ears is called blood otorrhea.*

The Pesach Lamb was the meat of the pure sacrificial lamb, which of course speaks of the Messiah, Yeshua, The Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.

## **The Hallel — What They Sang in Gethsemane**

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Matthew and Mark, both record that after the supper Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn before going to the Mount of Olives.

***Matthew 26:30 “After singing the Hallel, they went out to the Mount of Olives.”***

Whilst Western readers may pass over this detail without thought, the Jewish Disciples knew exactly what was sung.

At the Pesach Seder the Hallel Psalms are sung. These are Psalms 113 to 118. They are sung in two sections. The first section (113-114) before the meal, the second section (115-118) after the meal. It was certainly the Great Hallel that Jesus and His disciples would have sang as they left for Gethsemane.

This is probably what they were singing.

*Psalm 116: 'The sorrows of death compassed me... I will take the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the LORD.'*

Or perhaps

*Psalm 118: 'The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner.'*

These were not some randomly chosen worship songs. They were the prophetic texts that pointed to what was about to happen. Jesus would have sang them with joy, heading toward His arrest, as the Word says:

*Hebrews 12:2 "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."*

Indeed, we can understand that the Scriptures are true and every action of Jesus confirms this truth.

## **A New Exodus from the Bondage of Sin**

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When we gather all the Pesach elements together, we see a picture that is far greater than any religious institution of a church ceremony. Jesus was proclaiming and bringing in a new Exodus. The original exodus from Egypt was the delivering of the slaves of the Egyptians. The blood of a pure Lamb was used to rescue from death.

The new Exodus Jesus brought in would deliver humanity from spiritual slavery to sin and death through His own blood, the blood of the pure Lamb of God whom John the Baptist had identified at the very opening of Jesus' ministry.

***John 1:29*** “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.”

***Romans 6:17-18*** “But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching under which you were placed; and after you were set free from sin, you became enslaved to righteousness.”

***Galatians 5:1*** “For freedom, Messiah set us free - so stand firm, and do not be burdened by a yoke of slavery again.”

When Jesus said 'Do this in remembrance of me' He was using the same language the Torah used for Pesach observance. In Jewish thought that is *zakhor* which is to remember. It appears around two hundred times in the Bible. It does not mean merely to recall intellectually and nod one's head that it happened. It is to allow the memory to become very present and real in the recall of that memory. To keep the breaking of bread in our gatherings is to truly embrace the reality of what Jesus did. This is what he intended. It is to become a real deeply spiritual participant in the new Exodus in which Jesus has brought to us. He has been our Sanctification, our deliverer, our redemption and He will return to be our restoration, when He makes all things new eternally. So when we celebrate in our worship as we break bread, we declare that the Lamb has been slain, the blood has been shed, and we are those who shelter under it.

Finally, if we read the upper room narrative, without the Pesach context, we are only seeing half of the conversation. With the Pesach's Jewish context is restored, every element - the bread, the cup, the lamb, the psalms, the timing, the words – everything about it rings loudly, with greater meaning and points unmistakably to the Lamb of God.

*John 12:31-33 “Now is the judgment of this world! Now the prince of this world will be driven out! And as I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all to Myself.” He said this to show the kind of death He was about to die.”*

Jesus did not institute a new religion; He fulfilled the promises of God to the Jewish people and His loyalty to the Covenant. We, who are Gentiles, have the great privilege of being grafted into the Jewish tree as Paul wrote in Romans. The Gentiles do not have a covenant (that belongs to the Jews (Romans 9:4)); Gentiles have a promise:

*Galatians 3:16-18 “Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. It doesn't say, “and to seeds,” as of many, but as of one, “and to your seed,”*

*who is the Messiah. What I am saying is this: Torah, which came 430 years later, does not cancel the covenant previously confirmed by God, so as to make the promise ineffective. For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise. But God has graciously given it to Abraham by means of a promise.”*

We have so much to celebrate and to rejoice in, because of Jesus. We have been included by grace into His great Pesach. Therefore, never let us forget His defeat of Satan and the victory of that Pesach of Jesus, in our celebration of the breaking of bread!

Hallelujah!

