

“This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months...” (Ex. 12:2)

The Jewish Passover is an ancient celebration, probably three thousand years old, which remembers a decisive event that is interpreted in terms of God’s intervention in the history of God’s people. The Passover from Mitzrayim [biblical Egypt] is remembered metaphorically as Israel’s **creation story** and is foundational to Israel’s self-understanding.

WHAT IS THE BACKGROUND OF THE PASSOVER FESTIVAL?

The Passover story recalls the slavery of the Israelites in Mitzrayim and their miraculous and dramatic redemption. It is the story of a struggle between two powerful figures in the life of Israel—God versus Pharaoh. Passover remembers this struggle and its culmination in the release of God’s people. But this is not all the story. The Passover, as the name of the festival implies, hints of another event—that final miracle in which the Israelites, having slaughtered the *pesach* (paschal) lamb, were protected by the Lord on the night of the death of all the first born in Mitzrayim. The Passover lamb is seen as *the* demonstrative act of commitment of the people to God that set them apart—their final act of faith. What followed was their redemption.

The redemption from Mitzrayim is a foundational event in the story of Israel, remembered in the weekly Sabbath celebration, in the daily recitation of the Shema, and as the watershed of Israel’s salvation history. All subsequent events in the story of Israel are interpreted in relation to this single event.

PESACH MITZRAYIM AND PESACH DOROT

The aspects of the first Passover (*Pesach Mitzrayim*) are unique.

1. Linked to the taking of the lamb for the Passover is the puzzling instruction that this should be done four days in advance of the lamb’s slaughter (Ex. 12:2-6). *The Mekilta* suggests that God gave the people two precepts by which they would merit redemption: The Blood of the Passover, and the Blood of Circumcision. Keeping these precepts linked the redemption with the pledge of God to Abraham and his sons [and daughters]. The medieval Jewish commentator Rashi suggests that the extra days were needed (1) to pick out the lamb (2) to circumcise themselves and allow three days to recover and (3) to slaughter the paschal lamb.
2. The application of the blood of the lamb to the entrance to the houses of the Israelites.

Circumcision, the sign of God’s covenant Israel, and the linking of circumcision to Passover, underscores the communal and covenantal nature of Israel’s participation in the redemption.

THE PASSOVER IN TEMPLE TIMES

The tractate, Pesachim, in the *Mishnah* (compiled 220 CE) preserves for us the ancient order of the Passover Seder which is still the pattern for today’s Passover seder.

- The eating of a communal home based meal with symbolic foods.
- The ritual questions that invite the telling of the story.
- The retelling of the story.

According to Gamaliel (Pesachim 10.5) three things must be included in the telling—to neglect these elements would be to fail in one’s duty...

- The Passover—because God passed over the houses of our ancestors in Mitzrayim.
- The Unleavened Bread—because our fathers were redeemed from Mitzrayim.
- The Bitter Herbs—because our oppressors embittered the lives of our ancestors in Mitzrayim.

The Exodus from biblical Egypt is remembered as an ‘historical’ event in the sense of its direct association with a people rather than an event—it is ‘history’ grounded in faith. Out of ignominy emerge a people with a new self-awareness and commitment to God—it is a long and painful but glorious “birthing” memory that is kept alive in the Jewish consciousness, firmly implanted in the realm of historical consciousness. This is the self-conscious reality, the past in the present, celebrated annually in the Passover (Pesach) festival. The story is retold “as if every Jew came themselves, personally, out of Mitzrayim” (from the *Passover Haggadah* on Exodus 12:27).

The Jewish Passover event in Temple times was *always* associated with the lamb and the unleavened bread. The Passover lamb was brought to the Temple and ritually slaughtered. Families roasted the lamb and prepared a home based Passover seder. The symbolic foods and the wine played an important role in the ritual of the Passover meal.

WITH THE LOSS OF THE TEMPLE THE LAMB REMAINS, SYMBOLICALLY PRESENT, IN THE PASSOVER SEDER LITURGY.

THE CONTEMPORARY PASSOVER

The annual Passover festival has always been a powerful retelling of a story—a story that is rooted in the emergence of Israel from the mists of time.

A good story has certain essential elements:

- We must become involved in it.
- It must speak to our conscious or subconscious.
- It must be meaningful.

In the Passover Haggadah I really have the experience that I am there; I am part of the story.

The Passover Seder is the setting for “the telling” of the story. The telling of that story is called the Passover Haggadah (*haggadah* means “the telling.”) Each person participates in the redemptive story which is told over a cup of wine. Symbolically, the glass of wine becomes the receptacle absorbing the story of the participants. When they drink the wine they drink their own story as though they, themselves, came personally out of Mitzrayim.

THE IMPORTANT PASSOVER TEACHING IS...

No matter how bad life gets, there is hope; things will get better. We have to believe in divine intervention, and we have to tell the story.

This is why the Torah tells us “When your children ask you ‘What is the meaning of this rite?’ you shall say, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, because he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Mitzrayim when he smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses’” (Ex. 12:26).

MAKING CONNECTIONS

In the synoptic gospels Jesus and his disciples are Jews celebrating Passover. The Passover story was one that had a deep meaning for them as Jews. The earliest Jewish Christians were able to interpret, from Jesus’ actions [and in the context of a Christian redemptive theology] certain spiritual and theological understandings about the person and meaning of Jesus.

JESUS AND PASSOVER

The gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) tell us that Jesus celebrated a Passover Seder the night before he died. Understanding the deep spiritual dimension of the Passover is important for Christians. The Jewish Passover has always been understood as both the story of the 1st redemption from Mitzrayim, and as a paradigm for God’s deliberate and saving presence in Israel’s story for all time.

What really happened at the last Passover of Jesus? How does the redemptive message of Passover flow through to and develop into a distinctly a Christian theology of redemption?

Some scholars suggest is that it was, perhaps, after the telling of the story over the 2nd cup that Jesus departed from the traditional blessing. When the participants at a Passover Seder come to the end of the retelling of the story of redemption they drink the 2nd cup or wine—the story is literally *their own* story. Told over the cup, the cup of wine absorbs the story. *Matzah* (unleavened bread) also is a part of that story. From this perspective, when Jesus said “This is my body ... blood” he really meant it. This *was* his story, *his* life, *his* blood.

CHRISTIANS AND THE JEWISH PASSOVER: TEACHING AND UNDERSTANDING

As a central and foundational religious festival of Jews Passover should be treated with respect and accorded its full dignity and integrity. Christians must be careful to respect fully the present reality and purpose of the Passover for the Jewish people, “the people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God” (Pope John Paul 11, Mainz, 1980).

While there are theological elements of the Passover Haggadah which help us understand the mystery of God’s intervention in human history, and the meaning of Christ, the memory of Jesus’ last supper with the disciples, now celebrated as the Mass of the Lord’s Supper, remains a distinct celebration of the Institution of the Eucharist rather than a Passover Seder.

Prepared by Elizabeth Young, B.Theol, MA (Theol), MEd. 2010

