



Biblical Significance of the Jewish Feast of *Pesach* (Passover)

It is always a delight to share biblical teaching with our Fellowship friends. In addition to the study on these pages, you can find much more information and teaching about Passover by logging on to our website at ifcj.ca and visiting me in my "Rabbi's Study." Just type the word "Passover" in the search bar, and you will discover a wealth of information and biblical instruction on this sacred Jewish observance.

The Jewish holiday of *Pesach* or Passover, which begins this year at sundown on March 29, is the holy and joyous festival that commemorates the seminal event in Jewish history—the Exodus of the people of Israel from Egyptian bondage.

It was at this particular juncture in history some three thousand years ago that the national Jewish identity was truly shaped.

Commitment to Observe

Passover, along with *Shavuot* (Pentecost) and *Sukkot* (Tabernacles), are often referred to as the three Pilgrimage festivals. This refers back to ancient times, when Jews were required to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem to observe these festivals.

The command to observe Passover is found in the book of Exodus: *"The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, 'This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this*

month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. . . .

That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast"

(Exodus 12:1–3, 8).

The story of the Exodus and Passover is familiar to Christians and Jews alike. Joseph's brothers and their families had moved to Egypt during the famine in Canaan and lived there freely.

Decades later, however, a new ruler arose who did not know Joseph.



He enslaved the Israelites and caused them much suffering.

The Jews cried out to God in their oppression and God sent Moses to deliver His people with this message to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt: "Let my people go."

But Pharaoh refused to free the Israelites, so God told Moses that He would visit ten plagues upon the Egyptians, culminating in the deaths of their firstborn males.

Sacrificial Lamb

After the devastation of this final plague, Pharaoh ordered the Israelites to leave. (Later, God hardened Pharaoh's heart so his armies pursued them into the desert.)

Before fleeing Egypt, the Jews were told by God to sacrifice a lamb, one of the many Egyptian gods at the time, and to eat it hastily.

They were also instructed to place the lamb's blood on the doorposts of their homes to show their faith in God and their willingness to defy the

Egyptian deity. The angel of death, seeing the blood on the doors of the Jewish homes "passed over" them on the night of the final plague, and spared the all firstborn inside.

The Passover

And so, the name of the festival and the sacrifice offered became known as Passover.

The Exodus from Egypt marks God's redemption and the birth of Israel as a nation. Jews the world over share the Passover *Seder* meal to commemorate God's deliverance.

These biblical holidays give extra meaning and character to the Jewish year. In observing them, Jews affirm that history is infused with divine purpose—that events do not occur at random or in isolation from one another, but form part of an unfolding divine plan that ultimately will culminate in the world's redemption.

The Bible instructs us to observe Passover by retelling the story and symbolically reliving the events of the



Exodus. This helps us feel as if we ourselves were just delivered by God from Egyptian bondage.

The Bible also refers to the holiday as the “Festival of the Unleavened Bread,” since, according to the biblical account, the Israelites fled Egypt in such haste that they did not have time to add yeast to their dough.

The holiday is celebrated for eight days, though Reform Jews and those living in Israel celebrate it for seven.

Time of Cleaning

In Israel, the time leading up to Passover is a flurry of activity. No yeast is to be found in Jewish houses, because the Bible tells us, “*For seven days you are to eat bread made without yeast*” (Exodus 12:15).

Households are thoroughly cleaned to remove every trace of leaven (*chametz* in Hebrew).

Garbage trucks make daily rounds to pick up refuse and *yeshiva* students can be found on street corners watching over pots of boiling water where people can wash away every trace of *chametz* from utensils.

As they anticipate celebrating the traditional Passover meal, the *Seder*, with family and friends, people rush out to purchase Passover-appropriate foods and flowers to decorate their dining room tables.

The experience of being in Israel before and during the Passover celebration is truly unique!

While Passover is a Jewish holiday, it also provides some of the most profound affirmations ever made, both by the Jewish people and all people of faith.

The Exodus taught us that God is

present in human lives, that He does hear the cries of the suffering, and that He intervenes in history to deliver us from affliction and to redeem us from our oppression.

Jewish Roots

These affirmations are at the heart of not only Jewish theology, but Christian theology, as well.

It is worth noting that for one group of *Fellowship* friends, the events of the Exodus, Passover, and the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai will take on a much deeper meaning this year, and truly from now on.

This is because they participated in *The Fellowship's* most recent *Journey Home* tour to Israel in December.

This tour featured an extra bonus—an exciting visit to Egypt that included a drive through the very Sinai desert where Moses led the people of Israel after they left Egypt.

The group not only rode along a highway that follows the ancient route

of the Exodus, they also stopped at Mount Sinai itself!

There they visited the ancient monastery of St. Catherine's that contains a very unusual bush called “the burning bush.”

They also saw a large stone “table” which looks as if it was placed on a bed of rocks in order to display something.

The group's guide said this is where tradition says Aaron displayed the golden calf that Israel worshiped while Moses was receiving the Law (Exodus 32).

Lands of the Bible

I mention this not only because of the once-in-a-lifetime experience these friends had, but because our *Fellowship* tour this year in October includes another trip to Egypt and the Sinai.

If you have not been to Egypt, Jordan, and/or Israel, now may very well be *your time* to come with us to the “Lands of the Bible,” and see firsthand where the Passover and the Exodus took place! ■



For information about *The Fellowship's* ‘Lands of the Bible Tour’ go to ifcj.ca/tour

