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Chosen People

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Why Study the Passover?

Mitch Glaser

There are many reasons why followers of Jesus the Messiah—whether Jewish or Gentile—should deepen their understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures and Passover in particular. Perhaps the best way to explain this is to refer to a great passage in the New Testament where the Apostle Paul (Rabbi Saul) writes a letter to his half-Jewish son in the faith, Timothy, and explains the value of the Old Testament Scriptures.

The Apostle writes,

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness. (2 Tim. 3:16)

In this instance Paul describes the law as “inspired by God,” which may be more literally translated “breathed by God.” If you hold your hand to your mouth and speak, you’ll notice immediately that you feel breath upon your hand with every syllable uttered. This is a wonderful picture of the way in which



God's inerrant Word is communicated through the biblical authors while being inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The Law (Torah) is therefore profitable or useful for “teaching” (also sometimes translated “doctrine”), for “reproof” (learning what is wrong), for “correction” (learning what is right), and for “training in righteousness,” where Paul uses the Greek word that usually refers to a child and therefore implies that the apostle is speaking of the ways in which parents train their children for life.

The five books of Moses include so much of the biblical information that a person needs in order to live in a way that pleases God. However, our motivation for applying the Law to our lives should not be that we would earn salvation by our efforts, but that we would grow into mature men and women who reflect the character of Christ.

Think about it for a moment with me. The five books of Moses include the creation account as well as the calling of Abraham and his sons to become a nation living in a promised land. These first five books of the Bible also include the Exodus, the laws given to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai, the sacrificial system, the role of the priests and the prophets, the lessons learned in the wilderness, and so much more! We would all agree that the five books of Moses—the Torah—are the very foundation for our faith.

Another very critical element of God's instruction for men and women in the Torah is the description of the seven great festivals of the Jewish people—mostly found in Leviticus 23. Each of these great festivals points to something unique about the planning character of God, reflecting His sovereignty over the past, present, and future. The festivals look back on the history of Israel, are often linked to the agricultural cycle, and point forward prophetically to the Messiah in the fulfillment of all of God's promises to the Jewish people.

The Jewish holidays not only include teaching but also special sacrifices that are made, such as the waving of sheaves, the baking of bread, the building of booths, and the blowing of the shofar (ram’s-horn trumpet). The seven great festivals of Israel are replete with object lessons that help us better understand the story of redemption. These object lessons, woven into the very fabric of the feasts, enable the Israelites to “get their hands a little dirty” and to not merely hear or listen, but to *do* and *participate* so that the lessons of the festivals became ingrained in their very souls. It’s no secret to modern experts on the process of learning that it is not merely children who learn better by doing—but adults do as well. Participating in the activities makes these lessons unforgettable.

This is the foundation for the Passover: it is a festival filled with opportunities for participation in the remembrance of our great deliverance from Egypt. We were told to recount the story year after year so that new generations of Jewish people would never forget what God did in delivering the people of Israel from Egypt. There are symbols, given from Sinai that were part of the Torah, and instructions to the Jewish people on to how to observe the Feast. Jewish traditions have also grown up around these biblical injunctions to further help the Jewish people remember this most formative and critical event of the nation’s history.

It is wonderful to observe the Passover because there are so many invaluable lessons preserved in the festival for the people of God. Jesus celebrated the Passover with His disciples in light of His sacrifice for our sins. Similarly, Christians throughout the world, in one way or another, remember Jesus and give thanks for His sacrificial death through the Lord’s Supper, also called Communion or the Eucharist.

When Christians celebrate the Passover, however, we grow in our understanding of the Old Testament, affirm the Jewishness



of the Gospel, deepen our understanding of the Lord's Supper, build community with fellow Christians, and develop a common experience that will enable us to better communicate the Gospel to our Jewish friends.

Most of all, when Christians celebrate the Passover, in one way or another, we are passing along the glorious message of redemption to future generations and linking our children and grandchildren to the Exodus. This will help our children develop a sense of continuity between the Old and New Testaments and between prophecy given and prophecy fulfilled. This will build the faith of our children, giving them greater assurance that what the Bible said about the future has and will come to pass.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK: SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

This book has something for everyone interested in the Jewish roots of the Christian faith and in becoming better equipped to tell their Jewish friends about Jesus. I hope you will be interested in reading every chapter, but we understand that you might find some chapters to be quite basic and others to be advanced. I believe you will glean great value from every chapter, but if you view the book as a reference volume that you keep coming back to, then you might read some of the material now and save other chapters for a future time.

The book has been organized into five parts to take you on a journey through Scripture so that you may learn what the Bible teaches about Passover and the Exodus. Part 1 of the book focuses on the biblical and theological issues related to the Passover throughout the Old and New Testament. We begin with the Hebrew Scriptures and then move into the days of Jesus

Messiah, including His death, life, and resurrection, and the role that Passover now plays in the life of the Body of Messiah, both in the New Testament Scriptures and the present day.

Part 2 will help you understand the importance of the Passover in both Jewish and church history, including the unfortunate use of the Passover as a tool to persecute the Jewish people. Our journey to understand the profound linkages between the Passover, the Exodus, and Jesus the Messiah takes us from the Early Church to later church history and into our current day. We focus not only on the ways in which Jesus fulfills the Passover, but also on the ways in which the Church continues to experience the Seder, which is fulfilled by observing the Lord's Supper. On our journey, we also look at the various controversies regarding the Passover throughout this period and focus attention on the theological and practical implications the Passover can have today in the lives of Christians and Messianic Jews.

Part 3 of the book looks at the Passover in light of Jewish tradition, and I hope this will give you further insight into the Jewish view of the Passover.

Part 4 will equip you to use the Passover to communicate the message of Messiah in the Passover to your Jewish friends.

Part 5 of the book provides all you need to celebrate Passover in your home or church, including a Messianic Family Haggadah (guidebook with readings for the Passover Seder), recipes, and even lessons for your children. This final part of the journey allows us to explore some of the many opportunities to experience and participate in the celebration of Passover. With the biblical and theological foundations coupled with the historical and traditional and Gospel-centered perspectives on the Passover, we can pray for opportunities to serve and bless others as well as to witness the glad and rich celebration of Messiah in the Passover to our family and friends.



At the back of the book you will find a number of appendices, including helpful lists, charts, and maps, along with a glossary, recommended reading list, bibliography, and indexes to help you better understand and use the material included in the book. We pray that the entire work will inspire your participation in celebrating the Passover in your own home or congregation, Bible study or home group, or even Sunday school class or homeschool group. Additionally, we have created a Messiah in the Passover website, www.messiahinthepassover.com, that will enhance your experience of the book. The website includes additional materials that will further equip and guide you and your family to celebrate this great festival of Passover.

Even if you never take part in a Passover celebration, we believe the information presented in this volume will enrich your life by helping you better understand your Jewish heritage in the Messiah.

THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE PASSOVER

We have organized the book in a way that takes into consideration both the traditional Jewish and Christian views of the Old Testament canon. Even though the two are much the same, they are organized differently.

The Hebrew Scriptures

There is a Jewish acronym for the Old Testament canon—*Tanakh* (*TNK*). The three letters refer to the *Torah*, the *Nevi'im*, and the *Ketuvim*.

The five books of Moses—known by the Hebrew word *Torah*—are the same in both the Hebrew Bible and Christian Old

Testament (see appendix 1). These include the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

The *Nevi'im* refers to the “Prophets,” which are divided in the Jewish canon between Former and Latter Prophets. The Former Prophets include Joshua, Judges, and Samuel in the books of First and Second Samuel and First and Second Kings. The Latter Prophets include Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and what Christians call, “the Minor Prophets,” which Jewish people simply call, “the Twelve.” This corpus of Scripture includes the books of Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

The *Ketuvim*, which translated means “the Writings,” encompasses the Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Job, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and the books of First and Second Chronicles, which are united in one book entitled “The Chronicles.” Within the Ketuvim, Jewish people recognize internal subgroups such as the Megillot—or in English “The Scrolls,”—which includes the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther.

Those books usually associated with the Apocrypha were generally not included in the Jewish canon. The Bible used in most synagogues as the source of our modern translations of the Hebrew Bible is based upon the Hebrew Masoretic text. This text was composed by the Masoretes, a term referring to Jewish scholars in the seventh through tenth centuries who copied the texts, added the vowels to the Hebrew, and in their meticulous practices of copying the text ensured the accuracy of the Hebrew canon.

For our purposes, this book follows a combination of the Protestant and Jewish canons.



The New Testament

We follow a similar path in approaching the New Testament and pay special attention to the Jewish backgrounds of the New Testament so that we can better understand the linkage between Jesus and the Passover. Therefore, we will journey through the Gospels and then the New Testament Epistles, again highlighting the links between Passover and the Messiah. We will keep in mind the themes of promise and fulfillment and first-century Jewish understandings, which will enable us to see the New Testament through Jewish eyes. Our goal is to better understand our Savior Himself and the ways in which He celebrated the Jewish holidays.

THE USE OF RABBINIC SOURCES

It is nearly impossible to understand Jewish life, culture, and history without coming to grips with the critical role of Jewish religious tradition. The Jewish people are like the proverbial pulling of the loose thread from a garment—if you begin tugging on your understanding of the Jewish people in one area, you will eventually discover that this area is attached to another. Perhaps the common visible thread, which held the Jewish people together for centuries, is the attachment of religious tradition to almost every area of Jewish life.

This tradition is found in what is known as the Talmud, which includes two major sections: the Mishnah and the Gemara. Jewish religious tradition is also found in the vast number of commentaries on the Torah as well as many other genres of religious literature: devotional books, manuals of spiritual discipline, and many similar works.

You will notice in various chapters in this book that Jewish religious tradition is explained, especially in relation to the Passover. We have also dedicated an entire chapter that surveys the discussions of the Passover within traditional Jewish religious literature (see chapter 10). It is our hope that this will enable you to better understand the Jewish people, Jewish religious practices, and how this impacts the Passover—especially the understanding of Jesus and the disciples.

THE LAST SUPPER AND JEWISH TRADITION

One of the critical questions addressed in this book is, “How similar was the Last Supper celebrated by Jesus and His disciples to the modern-day Jewish Passover?”

Is today’s Passover celebration a transparent window into the way in which Jesus and His disciples celebrated Passover? Did Jesus observe the same Jewish traditions as Messianic Jews like myself who grew up in a Jewish home?

One of the immediate challenges we have to make clear is that the first part of the Talmud, the Mishnah, was compiled in written form during the third century C.E. The Gemara was compiled at the beginning of the sixth century C.E. Therefore; the New Testament could predate these important Jewish works by 150 years or more.

This century-plus gap in Jewish religious history makes us question whether or not the Mishnah in particular may be read back into the Last Supper—especially, the tractate Pesahim, which is all about the Passover and from which Jewish people developed the *Haggadah*, the Jewish guidebook for Passover.

On the other hand, we also understand that the traditions written down in the Mishnah were at one time oral. The term *Mishnah* comes from the Hebrew word meaning “to repeat,” and



you will learn more about this critical Jewish document in Dr. Zhava Glaser’s chapter on rabbinic literature and the Passover. We are simply not used to oral traditions having weight or authority, as our modern culture is dependent upon written documents. However, this written predominance is particularly a Western idea as many cultures today in various parts of the world still grant significant authority to oral tradition, even though they might also have written documents that are important as well.

Oral tradition was tremendously important in Israel, along with written documents of course, like the Bible itself. The writing of documents actually became more important between the first and fifth centuries, which is why the Mishnah was compiled in written form in the third century C.E. Yet, we still recognize that the written Mishnah nevertheless “repeated” traditions that were earlier transmitted orally.

So we ask ourselves again, “How much of our modern Passover Seder, as detailed in Jewish tradition, did Jesus and the disciples observe?”

The clear answer to this question is, “We do not know.” Additionally, we understand that this question is not only important for the Passover but for the entirety of the New Testament since it was penned within a Jewish historical context. In fact, whatever principles we determine regarding the role of Jewish tradition in first-century Jewish life—especially in the words and activities of Jesus and His disciples—will help guide us in understanding not only the Passover, but also many portions of the New Testament. There is no question that the New Testament is a very Jewish book and that in order to understand it properly, we must do our best to understand the culture and context of the time, which is both religiously and culturally Jewish.

In general, we have taken a very cautious approach and will try and understand the Jewish backgrounds of the New Testament

as best we can and not simply presume that the mishnaic tractate Pesahim or today's Passover Haggadah can simply be read into the Last Supper. Yet, we point out where we do find striking parallels between the religious customs observed by Jesus and His disciples at the Last Supper with later Jewish religious developments, and so many of our authors will suggest that these traditions could have been practiced during the Last Supper.

We cannot assume that every author writing in this volume will be in agreement as to the degree that the later Jewish traditions can be read into the Last Supper. The editors of this book believe that it will be valuable for readers to see these multifaceted opinions and then come to their own conclusions.

There is an old Jewish joke that most Jewish people are well familiar with. It's usually told as an aphorism with a twinkle of the eyes and a smile: "Where there are two Jewish people, there are three opinions." Quite frankly, I do not always like Jewish jokes as sometimes they express prejudice towards the Jewish people. But in this instance, I believe the joke expresses a profound truth that is critical to understanding the book you are about to read. Jewish religious tradition prides itself on having a variety of viewpoints on the same issue, and Jewish people view this as healthy. This reflects our approach to the challenge of understanding the level at which later Passover traditions may be read into the final Passover of Yeshua the Messiah.

We do not want you to be confused, but it is important to understand that there is a variety of opinion within Jewish tradition, as you will see throughout the chapters of this book. Where possible, we have tried to align the various positions of the authors, but you should expect to find differing viewpoints. In summary, there is not just one answer to the question, "What traditions did Jesus and the disciples observe during the Last Supper?"



Our hope is that your reading of this book will be the beginning of a lifelong journey in exploring the ways in which Jewish religious tradition helps you better understand the life and times of Jesus the Messiah.

PASSOVER AND THE EXODUS

You will notice as you read through the book that the authors often equate the Exodus with Passover. This is common and makes sense as the Exodus was the basis for the Passover. But we must remember that these are two separate events that are often intertwined in Scripture.

Some scholars use the term “the Egyptian Passover” in reference to the first Passover event that is directly tied to the Exodus event, and in particular to the slaying of the lamb in Exodus 12. The celebration of subsequent Passovers Seders, however, is a celebration of a very different event—though linked by a common origin and therefore having very similar themes. It is important as you read this book that you keep these original and subsequent events separate in your own understanding. Essentially, the Exodus refers to the redemption event, and the Passover refers to the retelling of the Exodus story! The first Passover is unique in that it prepared the way for the Exodus that occurred in history.

PASSOVER AS A SOURCE OF TYPES, SYMBOLS, AND PROPHECIES

The Exodus, the first (Egyptian) Passover, and subsequent Passovers are often used by the biblical authors to point towards a greater redemption. This is sometimes accomplished in the

Scriptures through literary types, symbols, and prophecies. However, the Bible student must take great care in the ways biblical types and symbols are understood. There is no question that the Exodus and the first Passover look forward to similar but greater events, but care must be given in the interpretation of the various composite elements of the Exodus event. We should refrain from reading prophetic fulfillment into every aspect of the festival.

It is best, first of all, to understand the Exodus and first Passover as the participants might have viewed them at the time of the event. When interpreting prophecy, we should always consider the way in which the original hearers might have understood the prophetic word—even when the prophecy refers to future events the hearers might not expect nor understand. I am sure that the Israelites who were delivered from bondage did not realize that the lambs slain for the redemption of the firstborn nor the Exodus itself would have additional meaning in reference to an understanding of salvation or of the work of the future Messiah (1 Peter 1:10–12).

Yet the Lord would fill these original events with greater meaning at a later day. But this fulfillment could obviously only be understood in retrospect. For example, we would not suggest that the Israelites slaughtering the lamb for the first Passover in any way knew that the lamb would find ultimate fulfillment in the shed blood and sacrifice of Jesus. Yet in hindsight we know this is true, which leads us to the second principle of interpretation we would suggest you to consider.

A second rule of thumb is to view Passover and the Exodus as a type seen through the lens of the New Testament writers. Because the Apostles Peter, John, and Paul refer to various elements related to the observance of Passover as a foreshadow of the Messiah, we have a solid, biblical basis for looking back



at these great events in the Old Testament and viewing them as types, symbols, and prophecies of events to come. Perhaps one of the clearest passages in the New Testament that helps us see this principle at work is in 1 Peter 1:18–19:

. . . knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.

Our authors will help you discern how the Bible uses the Exodus and the Passover as types so that you will be careful not to go beyond the text, because we cannot simply interpret every detail as prophecy or we might find ourselves forcing Scripture to mean something that was never intended, just so it fits with a pattern we envision ourselves.

One might ask the question, “Did Moses have the sacrifice of Jesus in mind when he asked the children of Israel to offer a spotless, unblemished lamb and smear the blood of the lamb on the lintel and doorposts of their homes on the night when the firstborn of Egypt were judged?” This remains to be seen as we journey through this volume, but for now, you might consider the following: it seems that the writers of the New Testament understood the Passover and the sacrifice of a lamb in this Messianic way—especially John the Baptist who cried out, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Yet there is much more to be uncovered!

Some of our authors believe that the way the lamb was selected is also prophetic of the schedule Jesus kept during the last week of His life and that the choosing and testing of the lamb and the time of the lamb’s sacrifice follow the dates of the Jewish calendar as well, making the calendar itself prophetic.

Many scholars also see the the seven days of Unleavened Bread fulfilled in the perfect, sinless life Jesus lived before He

was crucified. How purposeful was God in linking the Messiah to the Jewish calendar? Most believers in Jesus see these links, but how can we know that seeing the feasts fulfilled in Jesus to this degree is a correct biblical interpretation? These are just some of the questions we will try to answer throughout this book.

Some of your ideas about the Passover will be reaffirmed in reading this book, and in other areas you will be challenged! Our prayer is that you will be open to the Lord and to the Scriptures and read the chapters with an open Bible, using great discernment so that you will learn more and that your faith will grow through better understanding the redemption we enjoy through Jesus the Messiah.

THE FESTIVALS AS A ROADMAP TO REDEMPTION

It is as impossible to study the Passover in a vacuum, as it is the first festival among the seven great holy days detailed by God in Leviticus 23. It would be difficult to understand Passover without the associated festivals of Unleavened Bread, First Fruits, and the Feast of Weeks. These four festivals make up the first section of the festivals listed in Leviticus 23 and fall within the first few months of the Hebrew calendar. The final three festivals—the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles—are observed in the seventh month of the Jewish calendar, which is a lunar calendar, not a solar calendar like our own.

We have utilized a number of charts and illustrations for you to better understand Passover and you would do well to take a quick look at the chart that describes the Hebrew months (see appendix 2).

The seven great festivals of the Jewish year—and the weekly



Sabbath—look back at a great event in biblical history, are often tied to the agricultural calendar of Israel, and call for various ceremonies and sacrifices to bring attention to the theme of a given festival. They also seem to point to a greater fulfillment. Leviticus 23 itself does not inform us of this greater fulfillment, but other Scriptures in the Old and New Testaments do.

As you will see in reading through the various chapters, Passover is clearly used by the biblical authors to point to something greater. Commonly, the first four spring festivals are thought to point to the first coming of Jesus and the last three festivals in the seventh month are usually associated with His second coming. Once again, we understand this from later passages in the Old and New Testaments. You will not find this taught in the earlier chapters of the Torah—including Leviticus 23—as we understand this in retrospect through the words of Jesus and the actions of the writers of the New Testament. As you will read, Passover is the clearest and most common festival to be understood by the New Testament writers as being fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus. Yet the other festivals are alluded to in various ways as well.

ENJOY THE FESTIVAL AND THE BOOK

Will many Jewish believers in Jesus be celebrating Passover this year? Of course! As believers in Jesus, the festivals are more meaningful to us than ever before—especially Passover. We hope you and your family will find a way to celebrate the Festival as well.

Eating matzah and avoiding bread during the Feast of Unleavened Bread is a powerful reminder of Jesus's sinless nature, purity, and innocence. We are reminded of our need to

live pure and holy lives before God as well. Then there is the Passover Seder itself, enabling us to have a new and exalted view of Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. When we find the hidden piece of matzah called the *afikoman*, we can hear echoes of our Savior’s voice reverberating through time as He tells His disciples at the Last Supper, “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22:19). As we drink the four cups of the fruit of the vine, we will be especially drawn to the third cup when He said to His disciples, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood” (Luke 22:20).

Passover is more important to us now as believers in Jesus than it was for many of us who grew up in traditional Jewish homes. Passover has its natural and glorious fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah—the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

This book should be viewed as a reference book filled with a variety of information about the Passover. We will cover the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, other ancient writings, church history, Jewish traditions, and then help you learn how to celebrate a Messianic Seder yourself—recipes included! Finally, we will also help you learn how to share the message of the Gospel through the Passover.

May the Lord bless you as you dig into the Jewish roots of your faith and learn more about the wonderful heritage you have been given through your faith in the Jewish Messiah.