

PESACH / PASSOVER

Exodus 12:21–51; Numbers 28:16–25; Joshua 5:2–6:1; Luke 22:1–27

notes by Tim Hegg

For thousands of years, the faithful remnant in Israel had observed the Pesach festival in memory of their exodus from the slavery of Egypt. Lambs were selected, sacrificed on the eve of the 14th of Nisan, roasted and eaten with bitter herbs and matzah. Through the centuries traditions were added to this central festival that had initially given definition to the nation itself, though we cannot be certain just what all of these traditions were. By the 1st Century CE, we know that the opening meal of the Pesach festival had become fixed around a number of well-recognized traditions which had been woven together into a Seder, an order of the meal that had become fairly standardized. The Mishnah itself gives ample evidence to the fact that for at least the majority (those who followed Pharisaic *halachah*), the order of the memorial meal, the Seder, and the elements it contained, had become *halachah*.

Recognizing that the Synoptic Gospels seem to be at variance with the Gospel of John in some matters of the chronology of the so-called “passion week,” it seems hardly possible to argue that Yeshua and His disciples engaged in some sort of “fellowship dinner” rather than a Pesach seder in their final week together. In our Apostolic portion, Luke seems to make it clear that the meal he describes was, in fact, the Pesach seder.

First, Luke tells us that the first day of Unleavened Bread had come (v. 7), but he goes on to give a further description: “on which the Pesach had to be sacrificed.” The Greek ἔδει (*edei*) “it is necessary” points to the fact that the sacrifice had to be done on this day. This corresponds to the Torah commandment of Ex 12:6 which requires that the Pesach lamb be sacrificed on the 14th of Nisan at twilight. At first reading, the designation “first day of Unleavened Bread” might be interpreted to mean the 15th of Nisan, which is the first day of Unleavened Bread, but since by the 1st Century the *halachah* had been established that all leaven had to be removed by the morning of the 14th, this day became known as the First day of Unleavened Bread. So as far as Luke is concerned, the disciples of Yeshua are making preparations for their Seder on the 14th and actually hold the Seder that evening, as the 14th was ending and the 15th beginning. This is also confirmed by the phrase in v. 14, “When the hour had come . . .” Since the Torah demanded that the Pesach be eaten “that same night” (Ex 12:8), the *halachah* had been established that the meal itself should begin before sunset and carry on into the night. Likewise, since the Torah makes it clear that none of the meat of the Pesach could be left over until morning (Ex 12:10), the *halachah* ruled that nothing of the lamb could be eaten after midnight. This was a “fence” to assure that the Torah commandment would be preserved.

Luke includes the details of the chronology in order to tell us that Yeshua and His talmidim conformed to the majority *halachah* and participated in the Pesach Seder in solidarity with the Jewish masses assembled for the Festival. In short, Yeshua and His talmidim continued the tradition that had been handed down for centuries. They celebrated the Pesach as a memorial of the redemption from Egypt, as the historical event that gave clear definition to Israel as God’s chosen nation.

Second, we know that this chronology is what Luke intends as we listen to the first words of Yeshua at the Seder: “I have earnestly desired to eat this Pesach with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (v. 15–16). The fact that Yeshua speaks of eating “this Pesach” means that He was referring to the Pesach lamb that

had been sacrificed. No valid sacrifice could have been offered except at the Temple and under the supervision of the established priestly orders. And there is no historical data whatsoever that alternative calendars were accommodated by the priests at the Jerusalem Temple. If one were to offer a lamb as the Pesach offering, it had to be on the 14th of Nisan. So as far as Luke is concerned, Yeshua and His talmidim observed the Pesach Seder in conformity to and solidarity with the throngs that had come to Jerusalem for the festival.

But it is this very conformity to the established *halachah* that puts in even greater contrast the additions that Yeshua makes to the Seder. The central symbols: the Pesach lamb, the matzah, the bitter herbs, and the wine, all take on new significance in this final Seder of our Master. Luke takes up the events of the Seder itself at the point of the second cup (vv. 17–18). He takes the cup of Deliverance, instructs His talmidim to fill their cups and to drink, but then He makes the proclamation: “for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes.” When one considers this statement in light of the second cup, the meaning is clear. For the second cup corresponds to Ex 6:6 and the phrase “I will deliver you from their bondage,” and the statement of Yeshua indicates that the full symbolism of the second cup would now be realized. What He was about to accomplish would bring in the complete deliverance, so much so that no further “cup” would need to be drained before the kingdom of God would come in its fulness.

Did the disciples understand the connection? Did they understand the finality of Yeshua’s words as tied together with the cup of Deliverance? Perhaps some of them did, at least to some extent, but it seems clear that the full impact of His words awaited the time following His death and resurrection. Perhaps it was not until the Ruach had been poured out upon them at the subsequent Festival of Shavuot that they began to comprehend the words of Yeshua in His final Pesach Seder.

The same question comes to us today: do we understand His words in connection with the second cup? Do we know with certainty that Yeshua and Yeshua alone is the fulfillment of God’s promised deliverance? In our day, many would try to convince us that there are various ways to be delivered from the penalty and slavery of sin. Modern Judaisms continue to cling to the idea that Jewish identity, or even more, one’s own sorrow, repentance (*teshuvah*), and obedience is viewed by God as sufficient grounds for forgiveness. But that is not the message of Yeshua. The salvation symbolized in the second cup is available only because of what He did in offering Himself as an acceptable sacrifice for sinners. Do not be confused: there is only one way to have peace with HaShem, and that is through the work of His Son, Yeshua.

This truth, seen in Yeshua’s words at the second cup, is made increasingly more clear as He speaks of the *matzah*. In Luke’s account, Yeshua next takes the matzah, says the Berachah, breaks it, and gives some to each of the disciples seated at the Seder. That was the common tradition. But then He adds these words: “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me” (v. 19). The meaning is this: the matzah was symbolic of Yeshua’s own body and the kind of death He would undergo as a sacrifice for sinners. He would bear the stripes of the whip, the piercing of the nails and spear—all symbolic of the wrath of God’s holiness poured out upon Him as the substitute for sinners. To the long-standing traditions of the Seder, Yeshua had added something new. No longer was it to be only a memorial of the exodus from Egypt, or even a living symbol of that redemptive event that had given definition to the nation of Israel. Now the Seder, at least for His talmidim, would gain a new significance—a memorial of what He would accomplish as the matzah broken on behalf of sinners. The price of deliverance had been significantly increased in the eyes of all who would see. If the death of the first born of Egypt was the price for Israel’s

deliverance, how much more costly was the price of eternal salvation from the penalty of and enslavement to sin! The first born of Creation would give Himself so that we might be free.

Then Luke tells us of the third cup, the cup of Redemption, which Yeshua offers to the talmidim after the meal had been eaten: “And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, ‘This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood’” (v. 20). The third cup was to be “poured out,” the language of the libation offering. This terminology speaks of the final and ultimate giving of life, the wine symbolic of blood. But as symbolic of Yeshua’s life-giving sacrifice, He incorporates the “new covenant” as that which He would fulfill. How would it be possible that Jeremiah’s “new covenant” (Jer 31:31-34) could be realized? How would the nation as a whole come to repentance and to the place where their sins and iniquities would be remembered no more by the Almighty? How could the heart of stone be taken out and a heart of flesh replaced, a heart upon which the Torah itself would be written? It could only come to pass as the result of an ultimate sacrifice which would fulfill the complete demands of the Holy One of Israel. This third cup, then, spoke specifically of the means by which the final and ultimate deliverance could be effected—through the offering of Himself as the blood sacrifice. No other sacrifice could have secured the full and complete satisfaction of the Father, for no other sacrifice was infinite in its quality and quantity. Yeshua, Himself spotless and infinitely holy, would give Himself as a vicarious sacrifice for each sinner who would be saved. It was through His atoning work that the New Covenant would be realized, a covenant that would bring to completion the promises made to Abraham and would therefore secure the final and ultimate salvation for Israel. Even as the Pesach lamb had been the means by which Israel escaped the slavery of Egypt, so the Lamb of God would be the means by which Israel would enter into her eternal redemption from the slavery of sin.

In the beauty and wonder of this festival, and in the multifaceted traditions that fill our homes as we celebrate the Seder each year, we know that the highest reality is this: “do this in remembrance of Me.” Let us ponder afresh the death, resurrection, ascension, and intercession of our Savior, and affirm once again that redemption has been accomplished for us by the work of our Savior, Yeshua. May our celebration of Chag HaMatzot (Festival of Unleavened Bread) strengthen us all the more to a resolute faith in the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29).