

Can the Passover Meal have meaning to the Gentile?

The Passover meal is a mainstream event in Hebrew social and religious life. It is celebrated once a year, and many elements are incorporated into the regular weekly Shabbat meal.

Several things make this meal special. First, it is a family gathering, during which a meal is shared. Second, the conversation during the meal is centred around “remembrance”, to remember with a grateful heart, God’s faithfulness in our lives (we shall explore this in detail later). Third, the meal, the liturgy recited from memory at the meal, everything is rich in symbolism; each food item on the table is a shared memory. Fourth, the word *seder* means “order”; as God created order in creation, so everything on the table is ordered; the table setting is just as important as the preparation of the food, and the eating thereof. And finally, it is a ritual dinner, it is repeated in its set and accepted form. Over thousands of years, Hebrew communities have attached meaning and adapted ritual, to suit their circumstances.

Prior to delving into details, it is appropriate to recognise the significant contributions Hebrew society has gifted the world: **memory, optimism, faith, family, and responsibility.**

Memory

A major gift of the Hebrew people to the world is the idea of history. **To Remember**, is a Biblical mandate, which has its roots in the lives of the Hebrew people. The Passover story was so powerful, it had to be committed to memory, and recited with gratitude.

Memory links our past to our future. It turns history into destiny. Learning to treasure and value our past was the first step in our relationship with God. He was trusted in the past; surely He can be trusted in the future.

Optimism

The Passover story tells us, Moses' most difficult task was, not to get the Jews out of Egypt, but to get Egypt out of the Jews. They had become so habituated to their status as slaves, they lost all hope that they could ever become free people.

Without hope they would have been lost; with God's help, no difficulty is insurmountable.

- A tyrant like Pharaoh could be overthrown.
- A nation as powerful as Egypt could be defeated.
- Slaves could become freemen. The oppressed could break the shackles of their captivity.

HOPE separates us from the rest of God's creation. Anything is possible, when we place our hope in God.

Faith

The optimism of the Hebrew people is rooted in a firmly held belief, we are blessed by a caring God who cares for us individually. He desires to desire a personal relationship with each of us, based on personal faith in Him.

The God of deliverance did not say to the Hebrew people, ***"I am the Lord your God who created the heavens and the earth."***

He reminded them, ***"I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage."***

The God of the Exodus does not abandon us to our fallen state. He is constantly involved in our history and is committed to our survival.

If God is committed to us, faith in Him gives us the certainty that, in and through our present-day problems, God moves in the direction of the final messianic redemption.

Family

The Passover taught the Hebrew people and us, another major truth: the way to change the world and make it perfect, begins with our own families.

God did not command a gathering of hundreds of thousands in a public square; He asked the Hebrew people to return to their homes, and within the security of each family, declare His greatness and proclaim His faithfulness.

The Passover is the story of God's deliverance, on earth and a picture of deliverance to come. It follows a Divine master plan. It has a predestined order. "Order" in Hebrew is "Seder" – and that is why the major ritual of Passover is identified by that name. Coincidence is not a Jewish concept.

Others

During Passover, the Hebrew people celebrate their Divine deliverance from the slavery of Egypt. They thank God for getting them out.

But the question remains, why did God allow them to become victims of such terrible mistreatment in the first place?

The remarkable answer is, *so that they have empathy for the downtrodden in every generation*. They **were** slaves in Egypt, so must always be concerned with the care and treatment of strangers, the homeless and the impoverished.

The Hebrew people begin the passover meal by inviting the hungry, the homeless and the sojourner to join with them.

From their earliest childhood every Hebrew celebrates **memory, optimism, faith, family, and responsibility**.

THE PASSOVER MEAL

Two things stand out on the table: the Elijah cup (or the fifth cup) and the *seder* plate.

Elijah's cup is placed at the centre of the table and left untouched in honour of Elijah, who, according to tradition, left earth suddenly on a *fiery chariot with fiery horses* and went *up to heaven in a whirlwind* (11 Kings 2:11) and therefore understood to have never died¹. The prophet Malachi, whose book concludes with a prophecy about the *end of days, when... I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the awesome fearful day of Adonai* (3:23), makes Elijah the forbearer of the imminent arrival of the Messiah as King.

In every home, the cup is left untouched for Elijah and the door left ajar to welcome him without hindrance, in the event Elijah chooses their home to make the announcement!

¹ The Bible is quite specific about the deaths of the Patriarchs, as well as Moses (Deuteronomy 34:5), David (I Kings 2:10), and other heroes.

The *seder* plate at a Passover meal, contains items, each of which is a significant reminder of events in their historical past, and is shared as a collective memory of God's care, watchfulness, provision and love.

The six ritual items are:

- **Zeroah - roasted lamb shankbone** commemorates the paschal (lamb) sacrifice made the night the ancient Hebrews fled Egypt.
- **Matzah - unleavened bread** perhaps the most important symbol on the seder table as reminder of the haste with which the Hebrew people left Egypt, leaving no time to let the yeast rise. Among some families, *THREE tiers* of *matzoh* are placed one on top of the other and covered, representing the Kohen class (the Jewish priests in ancient times), the Levis (who supported the priests), and the Israelites (the rest of the Jews). The family elder crushes the layers signifying the end of the priestly function on earth which will be replaced by Christ the Priest forever.
- **Maror - bitter herb** to recall the bitterness of slavery in Egypt
- **Charoset - a paste made of apples, nuts, wine, and cinnamon:** representing the burden of **WORK** as brick-makers and stone masons (Exodus 1:14)
- **Salt water** as a reminder of their tears and sweat of slavery
- **Beitzah - roasted egg** signifying **NEW LIFE**.
- **Karpas - spring vegetable**, symbolising the freshness of spring
- **Wine cups and wine (or grape juice):**

Four cups of wine are drunk during the meal, each one representing one of the four Biblical promises of redemption:

“I will **bring you out** from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will **rid you from their slavery**, and I **will redeem you** with an outstretched arm, and with great judgments. And I will **take you to me for a people . . .**” (Exodus 6:6-7)

CAN THE PASSOVER MEAL HAVE MEANING FOR THE GENTILES?

Jesus told His disciples, *I have desired with desire to have **this** passover meal **with you** (Luke 22:15 - highlight mine)*. Jesus was looking forward to **this**, His third passover meal with the disciples (the “passover” is mentioned three times in the gospel of John). His desire was not for the meal; His real desire was to enjoy the meal **in the company of** His chosen twelve.

Jesus uses the passover meal to convey to the Disciples, *from now on, you do not need to celebrate the deliverance that was, rather rejoice in the deliverance that is to come! All you need to remember from now on is that I came from Heaven, my body was broken for you, and my blood (no longer the blood of lamb whose blood on the doorposts protected you from the Angel of Death) is the promise of the new covenant in My Name, which protects you from eternal death! So, **whenever** (no longer once a year) you break bread, **remember** my body was broken for you, and whenever you drink the fruit of the vine (fermented or not), **remember** the new covenant in My Name.*

The elaborate passover meal is no longer necessary, but the elements of the meal that was placed in an orderly manner on the table, can provide us, both a framework for personal confession, and a confession of hope and optimism in God’s future.

The Passover meal can be used by the non-Jew as follows:

- **Charoset**, a paste made of apples, nuts, wine, and cinnamon, which represents to the Jew, the burden of work, reminds us of the work we do (income earners) or have done (receiving a pension). It might have been difficult, strenuous demanding and back-breaking, perhaps income from work was never enough to meet our needs, perhaps supervisors, colleagues, team-mates were not “good”. This might be a good time to thank God for the work do (have done), and the people we met through work, and ask God to bless those who blessed us and bless those who made life difficult for us.
- **Maror**, a bitter herb which recalled to the Jew, the bitterness of slavery in Egypt, reminds us we need to rid ourselves of bitterness lingering in our hearts and minds, against a **person**, a particular **situation** in which a decision of ours led to an unfortunate outcome which has left the taste of bitterness, and circumstances that **life** threw at us, which left bitterness in our hearts.
- **Salt water** recalls to the Jew, tears and sweat from slavery, reminds us of hurt & pain we endure, of broken dreams and unfulfilled hope.
- **Matzah** recalls to the Jew, the haste with which they left Egypt, but not without God’s protection, guidance and safe-keeping. We might remind ourselves of times in our lives when we have acted in haste, but were never without God’s protection, guidance and safe-keeping. We might also use **Matzoh** to thank

God, Jesus has replaced the earthly priest, is our High Priest,
FOREVER!

- **Lamb shankbone** reminds us to thank God for the end of sacrifice, because Jesus sacrificed His life “once and for all time” to pay the ransom for our freedom, and the Christ breaks through the bondage of death.
- **Beitzah**, a roasted egg, signified to the Jew, new birth and new life. We Christ-following gentiles are reminded of BAPTISM and new life through Christ who is our Lord.
- **Karpas**, any spring green, which signifies to the Jew, the freshness of spring, reminds us, the promises of God are refreshed to us every morning, by the regularity of the rising and setting sun
- **Wine cups and wine (or grape juice):**

Everyone drinks four cups of wine, representing the four Biblical promises of redemption:

“I **will bring you out** from under the burdens of life”

“I **will rid you from** being a slave to anybody or anything

“I **will redeem you** with an outstretched arm - you will never without my love as I have paid the ransom to have you back.”

“I will **take you to me for a people . . .**” Through my Son, Jesus the Christ, you are His body, the Church, who carry my Name in the world!

What makes this different from the Passover meal for the Jew?

1. We do not remember anymore, our faults, wrongs, hurts from our past life - *as far as the east is from the west, have I removed your transgressions.* (Psalm 103:10-12; Isaiah 38:17; Isaiah 43:25; Micah 7:18-19)
2. We remember God's promises and know them to be true (Numbers 23:19; 2 Corinthians 1:20; Romans 4:21; Genesis 28:12-15; Joshua 21:43-45; Psalms 145:13)
3. We remember God's faithfulness, and are thankful for His love (Deuteronomy 7:9; Joshua 21:45; Lamentations 3:22-23; Deuteronomy 32:4; 2 Timothy 2:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:24)
4. We remember Jesus the Christ, surrendered His life on the cross, once and for all, to pay for my sin and the sin of the world. (1 Peter 3:18; 2 Peter 3:13; Hebrews 9:28)

Celebrate by remembering the broken body of Christ. One loaf of bread is the symbol one body, which had to be broken, to release Him from humanity and restore Him Divinity!

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The fruit of the vine, fermented or not, reminds us of the life-giving blood of Christ! Poured from one cup, we drink as one body, united by one saviour, who has given us one hope, which is the promise of the new covenant, that He will gather us into God's eternal Kingdom.

AMEN