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Passover - *is it for Christians?*

A personal view

by James McBride

There is much heated discussion and a great deal of confusion among the churches of God on the matter of "passover". Opinions vary on:

- the name that Christians ought to use for the observance
- when the arrest and trial of Jesus took place: on passover day, or an earlier day
- whether or not the "last supper" was a passover meal or an ordinary meal or a *kiddush* (religious meal)
- whether it coincided with the passover of the Jews
- was the Jews' NT passover on Nisan 14 or Nisan 15
- whether or not the Jews were observing passover at the wrong time, having at some time changed it contrary to the law, or by unrecorded revelation
- when the original passover in Egypt happened - the beginning of Nisan 14 or the end, and the many contentious aspects of this
- and complicated by the use of perhaps a dozen different calendar formats

We Are One In Practice

Needless to say all viewpoints have their proponents and each is supposedly "backed up" by Bible

texts, Talmud, history *etc* - and a large helping of pride, assumption and spiritual sniping!

A major factor, however, is that whatever our differing explanations, the vast majority in our tradition are continuing to maintain the same practice, the same form of observance, at the same time.

On the evening of Nisan 14 we remember Jesus' suffering and death by means of the bread (his body broken for our healing), the wine (his blood shed in sacrifice for our forgiveness) and the foot-washing (representative of our service to one another throughout the year). These symbols do not relate directly to the original passover institution in Egypt but to our new and heavenly covenant relationship with our Father through Jesus - and with one another as children of God. That unity of practice - as one body in Christ - is encouraging, a foundation on which to build. It must ever be the focus of our observance.

All of us, therefore, can focus on this positive aspect: we generally agree on how and when to observe this memorial of our Saviour's

suffering and death.

Lack of Discussion

We have a long tradition of viewing the memorial as "the passover" - but, as we shall see, this is a misnomer. It clouds opinion and generates pointless and unnecessary argument and division in the body of Christ. Perhaps it is time for us to re-examine our approach. It may remove much contention, and lead to greater harmony among us.

Let's examine a couple of factors that bear on the debate.

What is remarkable is the absence of discussion in the New Testament about a "Christian passover", apart from the Gospel accounts of the actual historical events.

The Gospels themselves are notorious for their lack of harmony in presenting the facts concerning that one passover season. For example, although Matthew, Mark and Luke have their internal variations all three are in general agreement - but are markedly contrary to John's chronological account.

The Gospels have generated centuries of inconclusive study, and

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even with modern historical insights cannot be reconciled totally with one another. These differences may simply be the result of our inadequate understanding of the life and times of first century Palestine, often viewed through the distorting mirror of the Jewish Talmud and the national prejudice and self-serving of Josephus.

The arguments are, however, largely irrelevant and I doubt there will be complete resolution before the return of Christ!

Passover a Sacrifice

A critical aspect that's usually overlooked is the very nature of the passover.

The suffering and death of Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament typology of the passover sacrifice. The Jews in general think of the passover ("the season of freedom") only as a celebration of their national deliverance from Egyptian bondage, and symbolic of freedom.

But God had in mind a deeper significance, which is expressed in the Psalms and some of the Prophets - the sacrifice of His Son, the Lamb of God slain for the sins of the world. John the Baptist pointed this out (John 1:29) and Paul, too, makes clear (I Corinthians 5:7) that Jesus was that sacrifice, fulfilling the Old Testament type.

It's vital to note that the passover was a *sacrifice*, (eg Exodus 12:6,27; Deuteronomy 16:2ff; Mark 14:12 margin). Without the sacrifice of a lamb there was no blood and no deliverance.

As with many Bible sacrifices, the

offerer ate some of the roasted flesh representing fellowship with God. The lamb was slain, its blood placed around the door and its flesh eaten. After that first passover, when the Tabernacle/Temple was erected the practice was "institutionalized", and changed in its details from time to time. But it remained a sacrifice.

Originally, passover stood alone - the sacrifice being at the end of 14th Nisan and leading into the festival on the 15th. In later Jewish history the term "passover" was used to mean the whole period of preparation, the sacrifice of the lambs and the seven-day *Unleavened Bread* festival.

Sacrifices are regarded with some abhorrence in modern Christian circles. However, they were approved and instituted by God and will, according to Ezekiel (*ch* 46), be re-introduced after Christ's return - probably including a passover sacrifice (45:21, Psalm 51:16-19).

It's not unlikely, therefore, that many Christian Jews before 70AD may have continued to sacrifice the lamb each year, following it with a "passover meal" - perhaps even according to the then current traditions. But all Christians, Jew and Gentile, observed the memorial of Jesus' suffering and death "*on the night when he was betrayed*" - as explained by Paul (I Corinthians 11:23) - through the memorial emblems of bread and wine. In the Gospels we see how Jesus, and events, explained these symbols to the disciples.

Note that the New Testament nowhere states or implies that the

new emblems are a substitute for the passover. The lack of clear direction regarding a "passover" and the emphasis on these new symbols focuses us not on a dead animal but on Jesus himself. Wrote the apostle Paul to the Corinthians: '*Christ our passover [lamb] is sacrificed for us*' (I Corinthians 5:7)

Sacrifices, however, were illegal without an altar and an authentic priesthood. As both ceased to function in 70AD when the Temple was destroyed, sacrifices were - and are - no longer an option. Jews today, for example, do not sacrifice a lamb at passover - which, of course, they could do if it were Biblically "legal". (It's not against the law of the land.) Instead they have a *seder* meal - a substitute which involves no sacrifice. The *seder* and the seven days of *Unleavened Bread* is loosely termed "passover" by Jews.

No Christian Passover

For Christians, then, it is not possible strictly speaking to "observe passover" - at least until an altar is again sanctified, and even then for proven Jewish Christians only (for the Jewish priesthood will control who may sacrifice). Circumcision, too, would be required (Exodus 12:48). While we could loosely term the memorial of Christ's suffering and death "passover" this merely serves to obscure the mighty shift from old to new, from old symbols to new, from physical deliverance to spiritual deliverance.

Instead we observe what in Scripture, and today, is variously termed Lord's Supper, Eucharist, Lord's Table, Communion,

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Memorial. It is therefore not strictly relevant when or how all the events surrounding the death of Jesus occurred. Such matters are simply of academic interest, and not matters for acrimonious dispute. Though many lessons can, of course, be drawn from the events.

Our focus is on Jesus' suffering and death as commemorated in the memorial service which he introduced and which the Churches of God unitedly hold annually "*on the night when he was betrayed*".

The book of Hebrews makes abundantly clear that sacrifices form no necessary part of Christian practice. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all the sacrifices and ceremonial of the Scriptures. Significantly, Hebrews does not refer to "passover", except historically. As passover is a sacrifice it may not, can not, be observed. Jesus, of course, knew the Temple services would cease and so introduced the widely available "unbloody" memorial symbols.

One In Christ

Further, in Christ there is spiritually neither Jew nor Gentile. But there does remain a physical difference. It was Israelites, not Gentiles, who were freed from Egyptian servitude - so the celebration of passover has for Gentiles nothing to do with a physical deliverance, though analogies are drawn (for Israelite and for Gentile) regarding our spiritual Egyptian bondage.

The "rites" attached in the Old Testament to the passover sacrifice and ensuing festival meal when the lamb was eaten are therefore irrelevant for Gentile Christians (Exodus 12:26-27). But for all who are "*one in Christ*" we observe the memorial of his suffering and death on the evening of Nisan 14*, the appropriate time.

In sum, it is counter-productive to argue over the details of the circumstances surrounding the passover in either the Old or the New Testament. The New Testament clearly introduces a different memorial of our Saviour - a memorial to which virtually all in our tradition adhere. The points mentioned at the beginning of this article are not relevant to its observance

* This is a date in early spring on the Hebrew calendar. A 'conversion table' is available from any of our offices.

None of this, of course, negates the observance of the *Festival of Unleavened Bread* which immediately succeeded the passover sacrifice. For Christians this joyous seven-day festival, beginning on the evening of Nisan 15, celebrates our new life through the risen Christ - highlighting the holiness of life God requires of us.

Published by:
The Churches of God Outreach Ministries
PO Box 54621
Tulsa, OK 74155-0621
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