

Why Celebrate Passover?

An Invitation to Learn About Your Hebrew Heritage

prepared by Tresta Neil



Why Celebrate the Passover?

by *Tresta Neil*

“Why are you having a Passover for our Relief Society activity when the scriptures clearly say that Christ was the last Passover Lamb?” a scholarly woman from my ward asked me. I was in charge of the activity and had planned out all the details, arranged all the speakers along with the complete Seder plate and meal. I had attended many Passover celebrations and had had them for years with my immediate family, but this was the first time I was leading a Seder. I looked at her in shock, of all the people in the ward I was sure she would be one of the most supportive. Of course, we as Saints of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints no longer celebrate this festival, but it teaches us so much about our heritage, why would she be questioning a mock up Passover?

“To learn more about the symbolism in the scriptures.” I stammered.

There were many people around us and we both got distracted by the other events around us, but her question stung me.

We went ahead with the celebration and had a wonderful Passover experience as Relief Society sisters. This sister did not show up.

It has been years since this experience and I have also continued putting on Passover Seders every year since, with my family as well as large groups. Every year I ponder this sister's question and attempt to answer it in every experience. Because I know if she had the question many others do too.

Celebrating the Passover the way the Jews currently celebrate the Passover is not in violation of the church, the scriptures, nor the Jewish community. It is celebrating a cultural experience much like celebrating Chinese New Year with dragon decorations and eating Chinese food.

The benefits of studying the rituals, symbolism, and participating in a Passover Seder not only teach us about our own Jewish heritage, but give us great insight into the sacrament and our Savior's Atonement.

Often the sacrament becomes a rote experience. This experience will help you to see new insights into what it means by Christ being the last Pascal Lamb, why he chose the bread and wine for the sacrament symbols. How the focus changed from the lamb to the bread and wine and why. You will learn the difference between a deliverer and a savior and how Christ is both. You will see how our sacrament meetings are very similar to the Passover even down to the closing of the doors during the partaking of the sacrament. Join us and learn! Join us and see!

Thought Questions

When you study the Passover and its symbolisms you understand our own covenants at a much richer level.

Answers You Will Discover:

- How does the passover lamb represent Christ AND us?
- Within the sacrament we promise to take each week there are several covenants, what are they?
- What does the "eating" of the bread represent?
- What does the "drinking" of the water represent?
- Why do we "break" bread (representing Christ's body) when no bone in his body was broken?
- Why do we take the bread and water at sacrament?
- Why do we brush with hyssop?
- Why is the lamb roasted and not soddened, boiled, or fried?
- How is the Passover a memorial that is to be kept forever? Are we still keeping it?
- How is it useful to learn all the symbols of Passover
 - To understand the sacrament and Christ's atonement better
- Are we keeping the Passover by ordinance forever?
 - The sacrament service is the passover meal

Background for Passover

Written by Richard Erickson

Passover is probably the most familiar Jewish festival known to Christians and the most celebrated by Jews. Christians, however, may not be as familiar with the Biblical account of the origin of Passover and may not realize the rich and powerful symbolism that is associated with Passover. Christianity, as well as Judaism, relies heavily on the Feast of Passover as one of their central symbols.

Though Christianity and Judaism of today are very different in their worship and life styles, this was not always so. Many people realize that Christianity came from Judaism and that Jesus and his early disciples were Jews. Jesus lived in the first century A.D. and celebrated Passover along with all of Judaism. Jesus taught his early disciples about the Kingdom of God, and that He came to fulfill the Law of Moses. After his resurrection his disciples realized that He was the Pascal Lamb. His disciples celebrated Jesus' death and resurrection during Passover. The meaning of Passover gradually changed and broadened. Instead of just historical Israel being saved, Christians now interpret "Israel" as all believers.

The sacrament, which is symbolic of the fulfillment of the Infinite and Eternal covenant (Sacrifice) of the Messiah, is part of the Passover sacrifices. Both are symbolic of the same event — the Atonement of the Messiah, the Lamb of God. We need to live worthy of the sacrifice of the flesh and blood of the Messiah, the Redeemer of Israel. In Passover we see at the very core of Judaism and Christianity, the Atonement!

Jesus lived in a small country, which had a unique religion, language, and particular ideas, traditions and rituals. By understanding their system of beliefs and culture as we study how Jesus and his early disciples lived we can better understand the role of the Passover. To understand Jesus as the fulfillment of the Pascal sacrifice, we need to understand the Passover of Judaism: how it began, the ancient and modern Passover rituals, and their significance and meaning.

The Feast of Passover had its origins in Egypt. The Children of Israel went to live in Egypt at the time when Joseph was second in command to the Pharaoh. The Israelites lived in Egypt for several generations, until the Pharaoh put them into slavery. The Lord sent Moses to deliver the Children of Israel from bondage. The Lord sent ten plagues on Egypt. The tenth plague was the slaying of the first born unless they were protected by sacrificing a lamb (or goat) and placing the blood from it around their door. This was the beginning of the Passover rituals that the Israelites were commanded to observe yearly forever (Ex. 12:14).

The Jews look upon Passover as a freedom festival; of being liberated from slavery to freedom and they look forward to the day when all people will be free.

Since the first Passover in Egypt, several changes have taken place in the rituals. For instance, there was no tabernacle (temple), altar or Aaronic Priests in Egypt. During the time the Israelites were in the wilderness the Lord gave the tabernacle (later a Temple), the altar for animal sacrifices and the Aaronic Priesthood. When the Israelites finally reached the promised land they established many local sanctuaries throughout the land of Israel where the people could bring their various sacrifices and offerings. Eventually, when the Temple was built at Jerusalem, sacrificial worship became more centralized and the local sanctuaries decreased. When Judah was taken captive to Babylon around 588 B.C., the temple was destroyed. About 520 B.C., Judah was finally allowed to return and build a new temple and altar. This was called the Second Temple period which continued until the Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Romans.

During this Second Temple period while the Temple was standing, Judah celebrated Passover as a national feast with solemn rituals, animal sacrifices, and song. After the destruction of the Temple, the Passover celebration in Judaism moved from Jerusalem and the Temple to the synagogue and the home. Instead of the lamb at the Feast of Passover being the main focus of the meal, which needed to be sacrificed at the Temple, the focus shifted to the Feast of unleavened Bread (matzah) and bitter herbs.

Some of the greatest sermons about the Atonement are taught through the Mosaic sacrificial rituals —especially Passover. We will talk about the Savior's Last Supper (which was a Feast of Passover) and how He fulfilled the Law of Moses and changed the emphasis from one of the anticipation to realization and now to remembrance. From sacrifice to sacrament.

The Passover rituals (ceremonies) foreshadow:

- The Savior's triumphant entry into Jerusalem
- His cleansing of the Temple
- The Savior as the Passover Lamb
- The Sacrament
- The place and time of His crucifixion
- Those responsible for His death
- The three days in the tomb
- And the time of his resurrection

The more light that is shed on the Mosaic rituals, the better one understands and appreciates the Atonement. During a passover Seder, we will discuss the Children of Israel (a chapter of covenant Israel's family history), how they went down to Egypt and became slaves and how they eventually became free through divine intervention. The ancient Israelites (as you participate in a Passover, you need to consider yourself as an Ancient Israelite) looked forward with anticipation to the Atonement of the Savior (Messiah) — the greatest event in Earth's history. In the latter-days we look back at the Atonement with thanksgiving. We have a different perspective or view of the same event. We will discuss some of the ancient practices of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and their significance to us in our day, such as the blood around the door and the unleavened bread.

There are people today who, for one reason or another, want to experience what the pioneers went through when they migrated to the west for religious freedom. They go back to their ancestor's homestead or go on some trek like riding in a covered wagon or pulling a hand cart. It gives them some understanding of what the pioneers went through. By participating in a Passover, we go way back in time to experience a little of what our ancestors went through and to understand some of the things they did in practicing the gospel of Jesus Christ. You are entering a sacred time and space (not secret) such as going to worship service. You are there to learn and edify one another. This is a festive time like Christmas (such as angles singing, peace and goodwill to men, the birth of Messiah and the reverence for the Redeemer and King of mankind) so there should be an attitude of both joyfulness and reverence.

The reason a person's life is worth living is because of Christ's atoning blood that was shed for mankind. The Atonement, which both animal sacrifice and the sacrament are symbolic of, is not something that just happened back in Bible times. Everything in the gospel is founded and based upon the Atonement. The Atonement is like a door and its hinges. Just as a person enters a building through its door, the only way into the Kingdom of Heaven is through the Atonement door (Christ). Everyone's salvation hinges on and is dependent upon, the Atonement.

It is not sacrilegious to participate in a Feast of Passover. We are not practicing the ancient Temple rituals of sacrifice. We're only going to talk about them and their eventual fulfillment by the Savior. One has to look beneath the surface of the sacrificial rituals and ceremonial symbols to get to the meanings and messages that await to be discovered. Some of the greatest sermons about the Atonement are taught in the Mosaic festival sacrifices and rituals, especially those of Passover and the Day of Atonement.

Animal sacrifice will be coming back again some day as part of the restitution (restoration) of all things (Zach. 14:16-21; Mal. 3:3, D&C 13:1; 84:31, TPJS 171-73), so it would be good to learn about it. Passover is just as relevant in our day as it was anciently. It is eternal in its message and theme.

It's important to learn all we can about the Atonement, because the Savior went through a great deal of pain and suffering (more than any mortal could bare) to pay the price in bringing about the Atonement for our souls. The Savior fulfilled the law of Moses (especially the book of Leviticus) and made it possible for everyone to be resurrected. This is a great opportunity to learn more about the Atonement.

We will discuss Malachi's prophecy concerning the coming of Elijah and the empty chair for him at the table.

To gain a better understanding about Passover, it is suggested that the participants read Exodus chapter 12 and 13 and 2 Chronicle 30. Also, go to any Bible dictionary and look under Passover or Feasts. The Passover Service is divided into 14 parts; the meal is served at number 10 (this is approximately 1.5 hours into the service).

Suggested Reading Material

prepared by Richard Erickson and Tresta Neil

If this article has sparked an interest within you to learn more about this festival, here are some suggested reading materials about Passover and the Atonement:

Scriptures:

- Exodus 12, 13, 23:14-15
- Leviticus 23:4-14
- Numbers 9:1-14, 28:16-25
- Deuteronomy 16:1-8
- Joshua 5:10-11
- 2 Chronicle 30; 35:1-19
- Ezra 6:19-22
- Luke 18:31-34
- John 2:18-22; 12:16
- 1 Corinthians 5:7
- 2 Nephi 11:4
- Jacob 4:5
- Mosiah 3:14-16; 13:27-31; 16:14-15
- Alma 25:15-16; 34:8-10, 13-16
- LDS Bible Dictionary topics: Feasts (Passover), Priests, and Sacrifices

Books:

- *The Life and Times of Jesus, the Messiah* by Alfred Edersheim
- *The Temple* by Alfred Edersheim
- *Wist Ye Not That I Be About My Fathers Business* by J. Rueben Clark
- *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper* by Alan P. Johnson
- *Smiths Bible Dictionary* (Passover) by William Smith

Talks and Articles:

- "Jesus Christ, Our Passover" by Howard W. Hunter
- "Passover, Manna, and Sacrament" by John Young
- "Passover: Was it Symbolic of His Coming?" by John P. Pratt
- "And None of You Shall Go Out at the Door" by Ted Gibbons