

Passover in the New Testament¹

Everybody knows that Passover is a big festival for the Jews, but not many people realise it was also an important festival for the Church during the first century, and should still be observed by Christians today, since there is no Biblical reason for dispensing with it. The rules for observance of Passover are given in Exodus 12:1-28, Leviticus 23:4-8, Numbers 9:1-14, Deuteronomy 16:1-8. The festival involves making a sacrifice, although this has been discarded since the Temple was destroyed in 70AD. If you study the Passover, based on these verses alone, Christians will argue that it's "Old Testament dead works of the law". Little do they realise how much the New Testament emphasises Passover, not just in the Gospels, but also in the book of Acts and the letters of Paul.

Passover in the Gospels Yeshua (Jesus) was brought up in an observant family that went to Jerusalem every year at Passover (Luke 2:41). He was crucified in Jerusalem while the Jews were gathered together for Passover, and he ate the Passover meal with his disciples (in advance of the actual date because he knew he would no longer be with them). The story is given in Matt. 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, telling us how he took the bread and wine to signify his body and blood, and how he was betrayed. John 13 also gives us the story, including the betrayal, but focuses on the washing of the disciples feet. Luke's Gospel tells us what Yeshua actually thought about Passover. He did not observe it legalistically, as if he was under compulsion. He said to his disciples "With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, for I say unto you, I will not any more eat thereof, until it be fulfilled in the kingdom of God". (Luke 22:15-16). Yeshua was the Living Torah (John 1:14), and under his direction we are also the Living Torah because we are under the New Covenant, with the Torah in our hearts. (Heb. 8:10). Yeshua was the Great Light, and he gives his light to us so that we are the lesser lights. (John 1:5-9). Yeshua desired to eat the Passover, and we should desire it also, and we are commissioned to teach the Nations all that he commanded (Matt. 28:18-20).

Passover in the Early Church When Yeshua celebrated Passover with his disciples, an event that is commonly called the "Last Supper", was this the last Passover for his followers? Certainly not! In Acts 12:1-4 we are told that there was persecution of the church during "the days of unleavened bread", and the soldiers intended to bring Peter up to the people "after the Passover" (not Easter as it is erroneously translated in the King James Authorised Version). Why should it mention Passover and the days of Unleavened Bread, unless the Believers continued to celebrate it? These were the Jewish Believers in Jerusalem, and it is certain that they celebrated these festivals. Acts 18:21 tells us how the Apostle Paul sailed from Ephesus so that he could "keep this feast that comes in Jerusalem". This was at the end of his second journey. It does not say which feast it was, but it probably means the biggest feast of the year, which is Passover. Acts 27:9 tells us how he kept "the fast", meaning the biggest fast of the year which is Yom Kippur. He was a prisoner at the time, on his way to Rome, and he was able to observe Yom Kippur because it simply meant not eating or drinking.

Paul's Third Journey During Paul's third journey he spent three years at Ephesus (Acts 19:10, 20:31). He wrote his first letter to the Corinthians while he was at Ephesus and told them of his desire to see them, but he would stay at Ephesus until Pentecost. (1 Cor. 16:5-8). So he celebrated Pentecost with the Ephesian Church. Then left for Macedonia and Greece, which means Corinth. He stayed there for three months, and then went back through Macedonia, stopping at Berea and Thessalonica (Acts 20:1-4). He went to Phillipi where he celebrated Passover and the days of Unleavened Bread, then he sailed to Troas (Acts 20:6). Then he was in a hurry to get to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost, so he sailed along the coast of Asia Minor, stopping at a few places along the way but missing out Ephesus where he would be sure to get delayed. (Acts 20:13-16). So Paul seems to have organised his life around the festivals. Pentecost at Ephesus, Passover at Phillipi the following year, then Pentecost again at Jerusalem.

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians As we have already seen, Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians while he was in Ephesus, and talks about his intention to stay in Ephesus until Pentecost. There are seven weeks from Passover to Pentecost, and he says so much about Passover, it seems likely he might have written the letter during the Festival.

In 1 Cor. 5:6-8 he says: Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, as you are unleavened. For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with the old leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

¹ C:\My Documents\bible\FestivalsTabernacle\Passover1.doc

Paul is giving them a direct command to observe Passover, and he is also telling them what it means. The Israelites ate unleavened bread before they came out of Egypt because they left in a hurry and there wasn't enough time for the dough to rise. The traditional Jewish teaching about Passover is that leaven means being puffed up with pride. When they came out of Egypt they could not boast of any acts of nobility, since they had no army and they were entirely dependent on the miraculous intervention of God. Getting rid of the leaven means getting rid of our pride. Paul wrote his letter about 58 AD, before the destruction of the Temple, so the Jews in Jerusalem would still be making sacrifices. He tells them that Christ is their Passover sacrifice, so there is no need for any other sacrifice, but they should still celebrate Passover.

In 1 Cor. 8:1 he says: Now as touching things offered to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but charity edifies.

This is obviously another reference to Passover, and the need to get rid of the leaven, but what sort of knowledge is likely to make them feel puffed up with pride? Since they had all been into idolatry, it probably means knowledge that is gained by secret initiations, so people could think "I know something that you don't know". In 1 Cor. 10:16 he says: The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body, for we are all partakers of that one bread. Another obvious reference to the Passover meal that Yeshua had with his disciples before his execution. During the Passover meal there are four cups, the cup of sanctification, the cup of deliverance, the cup of redemption, and the cup of praise. It would have been the third cup, the cup of redemption, that Yeshua offered to his disciples as a symbol of his blood that would give them redemption, and here Paul refers to it as the "cup of blessing" meaning we are blessed with the redemption that Yeshua has given us. He also appears to refer to two of the Passover cups in 1 Cor. 1:30 where he says "sanctification and redemption".

In 1 Cor. 11:23-26 he says: For I received of the Lord that which I also delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks he brake it, and said, Take, eat, this is my body, which is broken for you, this do in remembrance of me. And after the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, this do as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread, and drink this cup, you show the Lord's death till he come. Again another reminder of the Passover meal, and he goes on to say that people should not eat the bread and take the cup of the Lord unworthily, but should understand what it means. It isn't just an occasion to get together, have a meal, and have a good time.

A Verse in Hebrews Hebrews 11 is all about how different people did things by faith. Hebrews 11:28 is about Moses, and says that by faith he kept the Passover. We should also keep the Passover by faith. It's not just about Old Testament dead works of the law, it's about the New Covenant where God has written the Torah in our hearts, so we also observe Passover by faith.

What About the Gentiles? At this point it should be obvious that the Gentiles in the Early Church were observing Passover. Paul's letters were to churches that were made up of both Jews and Gentiles, and it is inconceivable that he would want a Passover just for the Jews, where Gentiles were excluded. Just to emphasise the point, we should turn to Acts 15 where the Gentiles were complaining about circumcision. The Council of Jerusalem met and resolved this question by agreeing that the Gentiles would not have to be circumcised, or keep the whole law of Moses, but has to observe certain essential things which were:

1. Abstain from pollutions of idols.
2. Abstain from fornication.
3. Abstain from things strangled.
4. Abstain from blood.
(Acts 15:20)

The emphasis on the dietary laws was to ensure that the Jews and Gentiles would be able to meet together for Passover and all the other festivals that involve food, including the regular weekly Shabbat. The Gentiles had to observe the essential elements of a Kosher diet, so that they could do their fair share of the work, preparing the food for the communal meals.

Conclusion There is an abundance of New Testament references about Passover, making complete nonsense of the notion that Passover is Old Testament dead works of the law to be abandoned by Christians. The early church observed it, and the Apostle Paul commanded that it should be observed. There is nothing in the New Testament that suggests that this festival, or any other festival, should be abandoned.

If we are going to return to the Biblical festivals, in accordance with the practices of the Early Church, what do we do about the Christian festivals such as Christmas and Easter? The answer is simple - we won't have time for them, which is just as well because they have no Biblical basis and are derived from paganism.