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THE NEW PASSOVER

As we saw in the last chapter, many Jewish people living at the time of Jesus were not just waiting for an earthly Messiah to come and set them free from the grip of the Roman empire. Nor were they merely waiting for a political savior to establish a perfect society. Many of them were waiting for something much greater. They were waiting for a new exodus.

This ancient Jewish hope is important because it provides us with our first key to unlocking the mystery of the Last Supper. As any ancient Jew would have known, *if there is going to be a new exodus, then it would seem that there would need to be a new Passover as well.*

In the first exodus, the twelve tribes of Jacob did not just walk out of Egypt. They were delivered by God. At the time of Moses, the people of Israel did not simply decide one day to throw off the shackles of slavery. They were ran-

somed by the Lord. And while Moses performed a whole series of signs and plagues leading up to the exodus from Egypt, ultimately it was the Passover that set in motion the exodus of Israel. On that night, those Israelites who sacrificed the Passover lambs were not only saved from the angel of death, they were freed from slavery in Egypt. As a result, that night was revered as one of the most important events in the history of Israel. As the centuries passed, the Jewish people celebrated the memorial of the Passover of Egypt as the foremost of all feasts. Every year, millions of Jews—including Joseph, Mary, Jesus, and all of his disciples—would go up to Jerusalem to keep the Passover and celebrate the exodus from Egypt (Luke 2:41).

But at his final Passover, on the night of the Last Supper, Jesus did something strange. During that meal, instead of speaking about the past exodus from Egypt, Jesus talked about his future suffering and death. On that night, instead of explaining the meaning of the flesh of the Passover lamb, Jesus identified the bread and wine of the supper as his own body and blood, and commanded the disciples to eat and drink. Why?

The answer, I suggest, can be found in the Jewish hope for a new exodus. Although the Last Supper was a Passover meal, it was not ordinary. On that night, Jesus was not just celebrating one more memorial of the exodus from Egypt. Rather, he was establishing *a new Passover*, the long-awaited Passover of the Messiah. By means of *this* sacrifice, Jesus would inaugurate the new exodus, which the prophets had foretold and for which the Jewish people had been waiting. It is this connection between the Last Supper and the new Passover that will provide us with our first clue to answering the riddle of how Jesus could have commanded the disciples to eat his body and drink his blood.

However, if we are going to be able to see Jesus' actions through ancient Jewish eyes, we first need to study the meaning of the Passover itself, both in Jewish Scripture and in Jewish tradition. It will do us no good to begin talking about how Jesus instituted a new Passover if we are unfamiliar with the Passover of Egypt, as well as the meaning it held for Jews in the first century. Although the basic story is familiar to many, for our purposes, it is the details that matter. So before turning to the Last Supper itself, let's first go back to what the Passover was like in the Old Testament and at the time of Jesus.

THE BIBLICAL ROOTS OF PASSOVER

In order to understand Jesus' actions at the Last Supper in their ancient Jewish context, it is important first to study the shape of the Passover in Scripture itself. Although the Passover is mentioned numerous times in the pages of the Bible, the most important description is found in Exodus 12. This account not only tells the story of what happened on the night of the first Passover but also gives detailed instructions for how the people of Israel were supposed to keep the feast. From that night onward, all the way down to the time of Jesus (and beyond), the Passover would be celebrated each spring as a "day of remembrance," an ordinance that was to be carried out "forever" (Exodus 12:14). In other words, the Book of Exodus not only tells the history of what happened on Passover night. It also lays out the paschal *liturgy*—the sacrificial ritual—that was to be carried out by the Jewish people on that first night and for all time.

This biblical Passover liturgy is important because it will set the stage for later developments in Jewish tradition, as well as what Jesus will do at the Last Supper. Hence, it is important to pay attention to the various commands that God gave to Moses for the people to carry out. Although any ancient practicing Jew would have been familiar with God's instructions for keeping the first Passover, it will be helpful for us to refresh our memory and review the basic steps laid out in the Old Testament.

Step 1: Choose an Unblemished Male Lamb

The first step in the Passover sacrifice was for every man to choose an unblemished male lamb, a year old, to be offered as a sacrifice on behalf of his family. As God says to Moses regarding the Passover,

This month shall be for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month *they shall take every man a lamb* according to their father's houses, a lamb for a household. . . . Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old; you shall take it from the sheep or from the goats; and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month. (EXODUS 12:1-6)

It's important to note that the Passover lamb is explicitly required to be a male, in its prime (one year old) and "unblemished." This last characteristic meant that it could not be just any lamb. It had to be free of defects. The lamb could not be maimed or lame or diseased in any way. It had to be perfect.

Step 2: Sacrifice the Lamb

The second step was for the father of each household to sacrifice the lamb. The sacrifice took place on the fourteenth day of the month of Nisan, in the springtime, around March/April. As God says to Moses,

You shall keep [the lamb] until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs in the evening. (EXODUS 12:6)

During the sacrifice of the lamb, it was extremely important that not a single bone of the lamb be broken. "You shall not break a bone of it" (Exodus 12:46). In other words, the unblemished lamb was to be sacrificed whole, without marring its perfection in any way.

It's necessary to point out here that the sacrifice of the lamb was a specifically *priestly* action. Although modern readers sometimes forget the fact, in ancient Israel, no one but a priest could offer a blood sacrifice. That is what priests did; they were set apart for sacrificial worship. The reason this matters for us is that at the time of the exodus from Egypt, the priestly right of offering sacrifice belonged to all twelve tribes of Israel. All twelve tribes were called to be "a kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6). At the time of the exodus, there existed in Israel what might be called the "natural priesthood" of fathers and sons, so that "every man" (Exodus 12:3) would act as priest over his own household by both selecting and sacrificing the Passover lamb.

Later on, this privilege of offering sacrifice would be taken away from the eleven tribes and given to only one: the tribe of Levi. This happened when the majority of the tribes

of Israel fell into idolatry and worshiped the Golden Calf (see Exodus 32). In the wake of this tragic event, the Levites were "ordained" to the priestly worship of the God of Israel, because they alone responded to Moses' call to renounce idolatry and come to the Lord's side (Exodus 32:39). From that point forward in the history of Israel, all the way down till Jesus' own day, only Levites were allowed to serve as priests in the Temple by offering blood sacrifice. If you were from the tribe of Reuben, or the tribe of Simeon, or even the royal tribe of Judah, you were prohibited from going up to the altar to pour out the blood of sacrifice.

But at the time of the *first* Passover, it was not so. At that time, before the worship of the Golden Calf, men from *all twelve tribes* of Israel acted as priests, offering the sacrifice of the Passover lamb in order to ransom their people and deliver them from death.

Step 3: Spread the Blood of the Lamb

The third step in the Passover sacrifice was to spread the blood of the lamb on the entryways of the homes of all the Israelites, as a visible sign of the sacrifice that had been performed. "Then they shall take some of the blood [of the lamb], and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat them" (Exodus 12:7).

Although the Book of Exodus does not explicitly say how the lamb was killed, in ancient Israel, the usual method of sacrifice was to slit the animal's throat and drain the blood into a sacred vessel of some sort. The priest would then carry the blood to the altar and pour it out in sacrifice. This practice seems to lie behind Moses' more detailed commands regarding the blood of the lamb:

Then Moses called all the elders of Israel, and said to them, "Select lambs for yourselves according to your families, and kill the Passover lamb. *Take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood which is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood which is in the basin;* and none of you shall go out of the door of his house until morning. For the LORD will pass through to slay the Egyptians; and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door, and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to slay you." (EXODUS 12:21-23)

Three things are worth noting here. First, the blood of the lamb was to be poured into a "basin." Intriguingly, although the Hebrew word can refer to a common basin (*saph*) for ordinary use, in sacrificial contexts it is more frequently a technical term for a sacred vessel, such as the "basins [*siphoth*] of silver" used in the Temple (2 Kings 12:14) for liquid offerings of blood, water, or wine. Second, the blood of the lamb was to be spread on the wood of the doorposts and lintels of each Israelite home, presumably because blood stains wood. In this way, the blood of the lamb would function as a permanent outward sign of the completed sacrifice, so that the destroying angel (and anyone else who happened to pass by) could see who had offered the sacrifice and who had not. Third and finally, this entire ritual was done using a branch of "hyssop," a strong wiry plant found in the Middle East whose bunches of flowers and leaves were good at absorbing liquid. This made it a perfect instrument for spreading the blood of the lamb on the wooden beams of the homes. As we will see later, the hyssop, the blood, and the wood

will all reappear together when we come to Jesus' own Passover.

For now, the main point is that the ultimate goal of the Passover sacrifice—as well as its ultimate effect—was *deliverance from death through the blood of the lamb*. It was not just any kind of sacrifice; it was a sacrifice that had the power to save you from death.

Step 4: Eat the Flesh of the Lamb

The fourth step of the Passover sacrifice is, curiously, the one that is most often forgotten. And yet it is arguably the most important for understanding Jesus' actions at the Last Supper. After the lamb had been killed and its blood poured out and spread upon the entries of the homes, the Israelites would then eat the lamb:

They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled with water, but roasted, its head with its legs and its inner parts. And you shall let none of it remain until the morning, anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. In this manner you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD's Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the first-born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast. (EXODUS 12:8-12)

Again, while this part of the Passover is sometimes overshadowed by the dramatic and memorable act of spreading the blood, it was in fact equally (if not more)

important. For example, if a certain Israelite family did not particularly care for the taste of lamb, what would have happened? If they took the lamb, sacrificed the lamb, spread the blood of the lamb, but did not eat the lamb, what would have been the result? Well, the Book of Exodus does not say. But it's a good guess that when they awoke the next morning, their firstborn son would be dead. For, as any ancient Jew would have known, *the Passover sacrifice was not completed by the death of the lamb, but by eating its flesh*. Five times the Bible states that they must "eat" the lamb; five times it emphasizes the sacrificial meal. The Passover was not completed by the death of the victim, but by a "communion" of sorts—by eating the flesh of the sacrifice that had been killed on your behalf.

And so the Israelites did. They ate "the flesh" of the Passover Lamb the same night it was killed, roasting it and consuming it with the unleavened bread and bitter herbs. The presence of the "unleavened bread" (Hebrew *matzah*) was a sign of the haste with which they left Egypt; there was no time to allow it to rise. In later Jewish tradition, the bitter herbs would come to symbolize the sufferings Israel endured in Egypt. With regard to the lamb, it could not be eaten raw or boiled, nor could it be cut into pieces. It had to be spitted with wooden rods, roasted whole over a fire, and eaten that night, with nothing left until morning. As some scholars have suggested, the Passover seems to have been a particular kind of sacrifice, known as a "thank offering," or, in Hebrew, a *todah* sacrifice (see Leviticus 7). It was an act of thanksgiving for deliverance from death.

Finally, it is worth noting that according to Exodus, the Passover was not an "open table" but a covenant feast. Only Israelites could eat of it. Any Gentile "foreigner"—

that is, a non-Israelite—who wanted to eat the flesh of the lamb first had to be circumcised and become a member of Israel (Exodus 12:43–49). In other words, this was no ordinary meal, but a sacred family ritual. Only members of the covenant family of God were able to partake of it.

Step 5: Keep the Passover as a "Day of Remembrance"

The fifth and final step was by no means the least significant. From the very beginning, the Passover sacrifice was not simply meant to be a one-time feast. Instead, it was designated as a memorial day, an annual celebration that was to be kept by Israel forever:

This day shall be for you *a day of remembrance*; and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as an ordinance forever. . . . (EXODUS 12:14)

You shall observe this rite as an ordinance for you and your sons for ever. And when you come to the land which the LORD will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this service. And when your children say to you, "What do you mean by this service?," you shall say, "It is the sacrifice of the LORD's Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he slew the Egyptians but spared our houses." And the people bowed their heads and worshiped. Then the people of Israel went and did so; as the LORD had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did. (EXODUS 12:24–27)

Here we see that the final step was for the Passover liturgy to be repeated. Every year, in the spring, on the fourteenth day of the month of Nisan, Israel was to celebrate this “day of remembrance” in honor of the salvation that had been won for them by God through the hands of Moses (Exodus 13:1–10; Deuteronomy 16:1). This command to renew the sacrifice every year shows that for ancient Israel, Passover was not just a one-time event. It did not happen once and then pass away. The Passover was to be observed forever, until the end of time.

To sum up what we have seen so far, in the Old Testament itself, there are five basic steps of the ancient Passover. They are as follows:

- Step 1. Choose an unblemished male lamb.
- Step 2. Sacrifice the lamb.
- Step 3. Spread the blood of the lamb on the home as a “sign” of the sacrifice.
- Step 4. Eat the flesh of the lamb with unleavened bread.
- Step 5. Every year, keep the Passover as a “day of remembrance” of the exodus forever.

This is the Passover of the exodus from Egypt. This is the biblical shape of the Passover liturgy, with which every ancient Israelite would have been familiar through reading the Scriptures and by celebrating the annual feast.

However, the first Passover was not identical to the Jewish Passover as celebrated at the time of Jesus. In addition to the Jewish Scripture, there is also Jewish tradition. By the first century A.D., the Jewish feast of Passover had developed both similarities and differences with the Passover of the exodus. So before looking at the Last Supper itself, we

these differences, so that we can understand them in their proper context.

WHAT WAS PASSOVER LIKE AT THE TIME OF JESUS?

Over the fifteen or so centuries that passed between the exodus from Egypt and the time of Jesus, the Jewish Passover developed and changed. This happens to most liturgical celebrations; over time, they expand, they contract, some elements are added, others are taken away. With regard to the Passover, certain steps, like the spreading of the lamb’s blood on the doorposts of the home, dropped out. Other steps, such as the eating of the Passover lamb, were kept, and their meanings were explained (and even expanded) by later generations. Moreover, new rites and rituals attached themselves to the Passover feast as it changed with time, such as the drinking of cups of wine.

Because of the changing shape of the Passover, in order to understand what it was like at the time of Jesus, we need to look not only at the Old Testament but also at ancient Jewish descriptions of the Passover outside the Bible. In these writings, there are at least four key differences between the original Passover of Egypt and later Jewish Passovers that merit our attention.

The Passover Sacrifice in the Temple

The first difference has to do with location. In the original Passover, the lambs were sacrificed and eaten in the homes of the Israelites in Egypt. At the time of Jesus,