

# Passover and Pentecost

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In today's world, many Christian groups observe the Easter and Pentecost holidays. However, many Christians have lost sight of the full significance of these events. In this essay I will look briefly at the Jewish holidays to which the two Christian events are connected. By better understanding both the Jewish and the Christian holidays, we can appreciate a larger significance to which these holidays and events point. A guiding idea in this essay is that many of the events or practices in the Old Testament point to or prefigure fulfillments in New Testament times.

(Note: I provide links in this essay that provide pertinent information for readers, but they are not my primary sources nor authorities for my understanding.)

## Overview

Three major festivals in Judaism, in the Old Testament, are Passover, Weeks, and Tents. They are known collectively as the [Three Pilgrimage Festivals](#). Of these three festivals, the two that are of interest are the Passover and the feast of Weeks. The [Passover](#) is also known as the Paschal. Over the centuries the Festival of Weeks came to be known as [Pentecost](#) ("day of Pentecost" Acts 2:1).

## Passover

### Old Testament

The main purpose of the Passover Festival is to commemorate the final act of God which resulted in the people of Israel being freed from bondage in Egypt. At least

three specific elements of the Passover event are pertinent to our current topic.

- One: Firstborn sons were killed for the Israelites to be freed.
- Two: A lamb was killed. Its blood was put on the two doorposts and lintels of the houses that would be passed over. The lamb was eaten that same night.
- Three: Unleavened bread was eaten.

The original Old Testament passage that describes the Passover event (the tenth plague) and that institutes the Passover celebration is Exodus 11-12.

## **New Testament**

The connection between Jesus' death on a cross and the Passover is obvious in multiple places in the New Testament. Three places are mentioned here.

The first interactions, recorded in the New Testament, of John the Baptist and Jesus are found in chapter one of the gospel of John. On two consecutive days when John the Baptist saw Jesus, he said to the people around them, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" (John 1:29, 35-36 RSV)

Matthew 26:17-29 (Luke 22:7-30) describes pertinent events just before Jesus was crucified. Jesus and his disciples observed the Passover meal on the first day of Unleavened Bread at the beginning of the Passover Festival. Jesus transformed the Passover meal into the Lord's Supper for subsequent Christians. Jesus' death was the fulfillment to which the original Passover event pointed. Matthew records:

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:26-28 RSV)

Paul, when writing to the church at Corinth, clearly connected Jesus' death to the Passover. He wrote:

Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed. (8) Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Corinthians 5:7-8 RSV)

These three references to the New Testament are not exhaustive, but they are sufficient to show a connection between the Old Testament Passover and the New Testament crucifixion of Jesus.

## **Pentecost**

### **Old Testament**

The Festival of Weeks was celebrated 50 days after Passover. From the implementation of the festival in Exodus until New Testament times, the festival was known by various names, and its significance or meaning varied as it went through various phases through the centuries. One aspect of the festival was constant. The festival occurred 50 days after Passover. Hellenistic Jews applied the Greek word for "fiftieth day," Pentecost, to the festival. Pentecost was the name used for the festival at the time of Jesus.

Alfred Edersheim, D.D., PH.D., in *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services* wrote, "According to unanimous Jewish tradition, which was universally received at the time of Christ, the day of Pentecost was the anniversary of the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, which the Feast of Weeks was intended to commemorate." The important point in the current discussion is that by the time of Jesus the Jewish holiday of Pentecost commemorated "the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai."

## New Testament

We read in Acts chapter 2, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. (2) And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. (3) And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. (4) And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." (Act 2:1-4 RSV)

Many Christians understand "the day of Pentecost" here to be referring to the Christian Pentecost. It was not. It was the Jewish Pentecost that these Jewish people (Jewish Christians) were observing, namely, the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. After the Spirit was dispensed that day to the Christians observing this Jewish holiday, then Christians began to observe that event as Pentecost with a new or fulfilled meaning.

The believers who were present in the house were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke in various languages. Many of the Jews, who had made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem had come from multiple countries, heard the various believers talking to them in the languages of the home countries from whence they came. The pilgrims marveled at the phenomenon. Peter spoke to the crowd of pilgrims and quoted Joel 2:28-32 (Acts 2:17-21) to explain what was happening.

Christians see this Pentecost event as a new element in the lives of believers. Christians are able to live life as children of God in the Spirit, the indwelling Spirit. The prophecy of Joel recorded in Joel 2:28-32, is only one such prophecy in the Old Testament. For our current purposes, the related prophecy of Jeremiah recorded in Jeremiah 31:33-34 is of particular interest:

But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (34)  
And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and

each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jer 31:33-34 RSV)

Hebrews 8:7-10 expounds on this prophecy by Jeremiah.

## **Parallel and Fulfillment**

### **Passover**

The Jewish Passover holiday is paralleled by the Christian Easter holiday. Christians decided to remember and emphasize Jesus' triumphal resurrection more than his crucifixion. As we see in Matthew 26:26-29, the Lord's Supper was the Passover meal that Jesus ate with his disciples just before his crucifixion. For multiple reasons, Christians commemorate Easter instead of Passover, but the Passover element is contained in Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

Some elements in the Passover event find fulfillment in Jesus' crucifixion. One element was the death of firstborn sons. Jesus is described multiple times in the New Testament as the "only son" of God his father. Thus, Jesus was God's first born son and Jesus had to be slain in order to deliver God's people from their bondage. The blood of a lamb was necessary to protect God's people from the death of the tenth plague. Jesus is described in many places in the New Testament as the lamb of God. Further, Jesus' blood is necessary for the deliverance of God's people. Some people see the positioning of the lamb's blood on the two doorposts and on the lintel as the points of a cross.

### **Pentecost**

The Jewish Pentecost commemorated the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. Jeremiah and other prophets said that God would someday write his laws on the hearts of his people when he poured out his Spirit on his people. They would live in the Spirit rather than by the letter of written law. In Romans 6-8, Paul expounds on this concept of life in the

Spirit instead of under written law. Paul makes the point that the primary purpose of the Law was to show people their need for faith in Jesus, life in the Spirit.

## **Conclusion**

This concluding section is based on the idea that many symbols, events and prophecies in the Old Testament point to and are fulfilled by events in the New Testament.

Regardless of some specific details, it is obvious that Jesus' death on the cross is the fulfillment of the event to which the Passover event points. The main motif is deliverance from bondage. The Israelites were delivered from bondage in Egypt, especially from Pharaoh. The motif of Easter is that God's people are delivered from bondage in a fallen world, especially from Satan.

The Jewish Pentecost points to the giving of the Law to the Israelites and is fulfilled in the Christian Pentecost when God's Spirit is given to his people and He writes His Law on their hearts. Christians live in the Spirit and not by the letter of a written code. Christians should never forget this important difference between life under the written code that points to the much more glorious life in the spirit.

I am not belittling the Bible nor the scriptures contained in it. I take these texts very seriously. But they are meant to guide us to life in the Spirit and to help us better understand the process that led to life in the Spirit. The Bible preserves for us a history of God's efforts to lead us to life in Him. The Bible should never block us from life with God in his Spirit, nor replace life in God's Spirit, nor be elevated in importance to a place higher than life with God in his Spirit. The written texts in the Bible and our life in the Spirit do not conflict nor contradict each other. They are both important parts of God's purpose.

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