

A young white lamb with soft, curly wool stands in a grassy field, looking directly at the camera. The lamb's ears are large and pinkish-red on the inside. The background is a soft-focus field of tall grass under warm, golden light.

*Key Moments
of Passover
Observance
in the Old
Testament*

BY Elizabeth Hodges

The first Passover observance came the night of the 10th plague, which is referenced as *“the Lord’s Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt.....I will execute judgment: I am the LORD”* (Exodus 12:11-12). God alone had the right to judge while also displaying mercy. His judgment was against all the empty, impotent gods of Egypt. Mercy was made possible by the shedding of blood. The death of Pharaoh’s firstborn son and heir to the throne was effective. The sojourn in Egypt lasted 430 years, but the exodus took place immediately. The Lord’s authority gave the Israelites cause to celebrate. Thus, Passover became a perpetual commemoration and celebration of redemption. The Lord expected the Israelites to teach their children about Him during these celebrations (Exodus 12:24-27).

Pharaoh requested one last encounter with Moses. He said, *“Go and bless me”* (Exodus 12:31-32). The Egyptians feared everyone would die if the Israelites did not leave quickly. Six hundred thousand soldiers and families left Egypt, unlike the 70 who entered with Jacob. Other laborers saw this as an opportunity to escape Egypt

but were not necessarily worshipers of Yahweh.

This Passover was a family event for the covenant community of Israel. The males were circumcised. (See the Bible study for more details.)

The second observance was held in the desert as the Israelites journeyed toward Canaan and is described in Numbers 9:1-14. It occurred in the first month of the second year after the exodus, *“According to all that the Lord commanded Moses, so the people of Israel did”* (verse 5).

Some could not celebrate because they were unclean from touching a dead body, but they also wanted to participate. Moses did not give an immediate answer but sought the Lord for guidance. The Lord said, *“If any one of you...is unclean through touching a dead body or is on a long journey,”* that person could celebrate Passover in the second month following the same guidelines. These guidelines affected both the sojourner (alien) and the native (9:14).

Any person who did not meet these two exceptions and *“failed to keep the Passover would be cut off because he did not bring the Lord’s offering at its appointed time; that man*

shall bear his sin" (9:13).

We learn from Joshua that this was the last Passover celebrated until the Israelites entered the Promised Land (Joshua 5:10). The generation of the exodus had been condemned to die in the wilderness. Thus, a Passover celebrating deliverance from judgment would have had little meaning for them.

Joshua 5 records the third observance. Verses 1-9 record the circumcision of the males who "*had not been circumcised on the way*," allowing the keeping of Passover at the appointed time. Israel again inherited the blessings and promises the earlier generation received when it left Egypt.

King Hezekiah initiated another celebration immediately after the Temple was reconsecrated. He desired to unite the entire nation around the temple and ensure proper observance of its services, especially the Passover. "*They had not kept it as often as prescribed*" (2 Chronicles 30:5).

Letters were sent to "*all Israel and Judah, also to Ephraim and Manasseh that they should come to the house of the Lord at Jerusalem to keep the Passover*" (2 Chronicles 30:1). As in the restoration of the

temple, King Hezekiah enlisted the princes and the entire assembly. Thus, the letters went to everyone, including those left in the land and those who had escaped Assyrian captivity. These letters were sent from Dan to Beersheba, the farthest points north and south. The celebration occurred in the second month since "*the priests had not consecrated themselves in sufficient number, nor had the people assembled in Jerusalem*" (verse 3).

The letters were a message of unity with an invitation to repent and return to the Lord. Hezekiah challenged the people not to follow their parent's unfaithfulness nor to stiffen their necks, which resulted in captivity. He reminded the assembly to "*yield yourselves to the Lord ...for the Lord your God is gracious and merciful and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him*" (verses 8-9).

The northern tribes scorned the couriers, and only a few humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem.

The southern tribes were ready to repent because "*the hand of God was on Judah*" (verse 12). Verse 13 states that "*a very great assembly*" gathered in Jerusalem. They began to remove the altars for burn-

ing incense and threw them in the Kidron Brook. Levites had to help slaughter the Passover lambs on the 14th day of the second month due to the shortage of consecrated priests. The people's enthusiasm caused these priests and Levites to consider the depth of their sin. This resulted in them being ashamed: *"so they consecrated themselves and brought burnt offerings into the house of the Lord"* (verse 15.)

Many who came from the north (Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar, and Zebulun) had not consecrated themselves, yet they ate the Passover. So, Hezekiah prayed for them, asking God to forgive them for disobeying His guidelines. His prayer focused on their hearts rather than the rituals of purification. The Lord heard and healed the people (verse 20). This was the first time in more than 200 years that the entire nation had observed the Passover together.

God heard Hezekiah's prayer. Scrupulous attention to the Law was expected as an indication of one's heart.

The assembly then joyfully celebrated the Feast of Unleavened Bread for seven days. The celebration was extended for seven days. Hezekiah and the priests donated large numbers of bulls and sheep. There was singing, rejoicing, and giving thanks, *"for since the time of Solomon the son of David king of Israel there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem"* (verse 26). The priests and Levites blessed the people, *"and their prayer came to his holy habitation in heaven"* (verse 27).

Attempts to secure unity through arms or ungodly alliances had failed. Hezekiah's desire to unite around worship did. We would call this revival!

King Josiah began serving the Lord faithfully at age 16 and purging the land of idolatrous practices by age 20. At age 26, he initiated the repair of *"the house of the Lord his God"* (2 Chronicles 35:8). The ark had been replaced, which means it had been removed from the Temple at some point. He wanted God to have His rightful, permanent place among His people. The scroll discovered during the Temple repairs clearly included the covenant curses.

Josiah desired his people to reflect once again on God's redemptive work among the Israelites. The exodus from Egypt and the return from exile were divine deliverances. Passover had not been observed since

the days of the judges (2 Kings 23:22). Thus, Josiah's reforms led to a renewed celebration of the Passover in Jerusalem, reestablishing the guidelines and personnel for the Israelites' religious life.

Following the Law, the celebration occurred on the 14th day of the first month and did not allow for the adjustments made by King Hezekiah. Josiah's celebration seems unique in that all the Passover lambs were slaughtered exclusively by the Levites, and Josiah and his officers supplied all the animals needed. Once again, the tribes of Israel were united by gathering them to worship.

*Revival is a work of the Lord
on the heart of those who repent from the heart.
(Moody Bible Commentary, page 627)*

Mark 14 records the last Passover celebration Jesus had with His disciples during Passion Week, which we call the Lord's Supper. Jesus knew His hour had come (Luke 22:14). He told the disciples, *"I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God"* (verses 15-16).

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