

CHAPTER 3

A BABYLONIAN PASSOVER: IT'S A QUESTION OF TIME

You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

—Yeshua

THE FINAL PLAGUE on Egypt was the plague of the Passover, when God passed “over” those who came under the blood of the lamb, but passed “through” and struck the Egyptians (Ex. 12:23). The plague was not called the plague of unleavened bread, but the plague of Passover. It was indeed a plague and a curse for the Egyptians who were not God’s people and who did not accept the blood of the lamb, but it was a great blessing for those who did! Passover comes the day before the Feast of Unleavened Bread. In God’s Word and for the Hebrews, each “day” begins with the evening and ends at twilight in the evening of the next day, thus making a full twenty-four-hour day.

The plague of the death of all the firstborn who did not come under the blood of the lamb was the great Passover plague that had taken place at midnight on the fourteenth day of the month. Remember, “Midnight” stands for middle of the night, not beginning of morning or new day. **Had this plague taken place on the fifteenth (the day after the Passover), it would not be the Passover plague, for God said the Passover was on the fourteenth.** The “passing over,” for which the day is named, took place in the nighttime portion of the Passover feast (Ex.12:12).

Originally, the Passover lamb was killed by each head of household. God’s promise was to make Israel a holy nation, a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6). Therefore, at Passover, each head of household acted as a priest for his family by picking out a perfect lamb ahead of time and then sacrificing that lamb for his family. Notice Exodus 12:21: “Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel and said to them, ‘Pick out and take lambs for yourselves according to your families, and kill the Passover lamb.’”

Unlike the counting and keeping of the Festival of *Shavuot* (Firstfruits or Pentecost), which required the priest to perform priestly sacrifices and wave offerings forbidden the public (Lev. 23:11–21), the Paschal lamb was killed by each head of household. Further, although these holy days share certain common principles of humility, repentance, and coming out of the world, they each have a unique purpose and were kept as consecutive but separate festivals. Each

male head of his family was responsible to be ready for the Passover in whichever region he happened to live. Passover was a family time, when fathers would share the meanings of the Passover symbols with their children and willing neighbors. It was an assembly of two or more families but not of the whole congregation, as were the high days of each of the others feasts. Each of the seven annual feasts had in its descriptive commands the words “holy convocation” for the corresponding high day (Lev. 23:7–8, 21, 24, 27, 35–36), seven annual high days in all. You will notice Passover is not among them. This is because Passover was not kept by convening a meeting of the whole congregation in the same way the other festivals were. Passover was usually kept with extended families and neighbors gathering together according to the number of people needed to eat a lamb (Ex. 12:4). In this way, each head of household would participate in the Paschal meal and service with the senior patriarch over all guiding the service.

Each father had his part and opportunity to learn how to act as priest on behalf of his family to God, for God had told them, “You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:6). This remains God’s purpose for His people (Rev. 1:6; 5:10). Peter continued to teach the important principle to the New Testament “spiritual” Jews: “You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5).

As Jesus and His disciples ate the Passover lamb with bitter herbs and unleavened bread, Jesus explained to them more completely the symbolism of unleavened bread and wine (Luke 22:19–20). It was customary to explain the history and meaning of the day during the meal. Jesus expounded on that practice and carried it further by adding to it the new covenant context and fulfillment for a fuller understanding. The teaching and explanation surrounding Passover (Haggadah) remains the responsibility of each head of household as we keep Passover today. In the *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, David H. Stern explains this beautifully:

At Passover Jews all over the world retell the story of the plagues and the Exodus and thus proclaim the central fact of which their peoplehood is founded (see 5:6–8N). Likewise, members of the Messianic Community are to **proclaim the death of the Lord** as their exodus from sin and as the basis for their existence. Both proclamations look not only back toward a past redemption but also forward to a future one; hence the proclamation is **until he comes** the second time.¹

Since the Passover was to be conducted in an area near to where the Lord “chooses to put His name” (Deut. 16:2–6), each family would already be gathered into the general area so they could join the general assembly to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread on the following day (Deut. 16:8; Lev. 23:5–7).

PASSOVER “CHANGED” AFTER THE BABYLONIAN EXILE

While it cannot be denied there is a common theme of unleavened bread shared by both Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, neither can it be denied they had distinctly different purposes, and that they were kept separately on consecutive but separate days (Lev. 23:5–7). But after the Babylonian exile this changed. Notice these words from the *Encyclopedia Judaica*:

“The feast of Passover consists of two parts: The Passover ceremony and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Originally both parts existed separately; but at the beginning of the Exile they were combined.”²

The *Encyclopedia Judaica* makes two important points here:

1. “Originally both parts existed separately.” Can you see that this statement is tantamount to saying that these two festivals were originally kept on separate days? How could they be kept separately at the same time? In other words, originally one was kept on the fourteenth, while the other began on the fifteenth! Clearly, use of the word *originally* shows that there was a change that combined them at a later date. How true! Notice further the second part of the above quote: “but at the beginning of the Exile

they were combined.” The exile into Babylon brought a change in the keeping of Passover by *combining* it with the Feast of Unleavened Bread! What a statement from such a respected historical source! It was during the exile that Passover was “combined” by being transferred from the fourteenth to the fifteenth! An incredible admission!

2. “but at the beginning of the Exile they were combined.” A second important point the *Encyclopedia Judaica* makes is the timing of the change, that is, at the time of greatest Babylonian influence—when Israel was not in charge of her own destiny.

Encyclopedia Judaica states that it was at the time of the Babylon exile that the Passover began to be changed and “combined” with the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Indeed the Babylonian influence crept deeply into many of Israel’s religious and civil affairs. The biblical month of Abib, in which Passover fell, began to be called by the Babylonian name **Nisan**.

THE MORNING/EVENING SACRIFICE AND PASSOVER

The reckoning of each day’s time—and thus the time of day that Passover was kept—was also affected by this intense Gentile influence suffered at the hands of the Babylonians during the Exile. The biblical meanings of “morning” and “evening” now began to

be understood with a Babylonian flair by dividing the twelve hours of the day into two six-hour segments; likewise the twelve hours of the night were divided into two six-hour segments. The Hebrews had learned from the Babylonians to divide the twelve hours of the day by appointing the six hours before noon to the morning, and the six hours after noon to the evening. They were also influenced by the Babylonian system of dividing the twelve hours of the night by giving the six hours before midnight to that night, but appointing the six hours after midnight to the next morning. Thus the last six hours of the night (midnight to 6:00 A.M.) and the first six hours of the day (6:00 A.M. to noon) all belonged to the “morning.” (This is why we still call 1:00 A.M. “morning” even though it is clearly part of the night.) Conversely, the last six hours of the day (from noon till 6:00 P.M.) were called “evening,” even though it was clearly still day. For sacrificial purposes this became a critical difference. Six-and-a-half hours into the “day” (12:30 P.M.) could now be interpreted as being “evening,” even though it was not evening. For sacrificial purposes, this new interpretation of “evening” replaced the biblical meaning of “evening,” which was the period of about thirty minutes to an hour before *and* after sunset known as the “twilight” period or “between the evenings.” The same change in meaning was applied to the “morning,” at least where sacrifices and other ritual services were involved. Notice these incredible words from the Babylonian Talmud:

“(33) Lit. ... denoting the continual daily evening sacrifice which was offered as a rule from the sixth and half hours after sunrise (the day being divided into twelve hours).”³

Notice the “evening sacrifice” came to be offered from the “sixth and half hours after sunrise.” Incredible! The effects of this Babylonian influence are believed to have altered the time the morning and evening sacrifices were being offered during the second temple period.

Biblically, morning and evening sacrifices or offerings were offered either in the actual morning or in the actual evening just as God’s Word prescribes. They were not offered in the middle of the day.

- Notice when Abraham offered Isaac: “So *Abraham rose early in the morning* and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him” (Gen. 22:3, emphasis added).
- When God commanded Abraham to bring a three-year-old heifer, goat, and ram to divide them to cut a covenant, God appeared to Abraham in a dream “*when the sun was going down*” (Gen. 15:9–12).
- Job “*would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings*” for the sins of his sons (Job 1:5).

- Righteous Hezekiah “rose early” to have the priests offer a sin offering for Judah: “Then *King Hezekiah rose early*, gathered the rulers of the city, and went up to the house of the LORD. And they brought seven bulls, seven rams, seven lambs, and seven male goats for a sin offering for the kingdom, for the sanctuary, and for Judah. Then he commanded the priests, the sons of Aaron, to offer them on the altar of the LORD” (2 Chron. 29:20–21).
- Elijah’s great offering that was licked up by fire took place long after “midday.” It took place at the time of the “evening sacrifice.” Notice: “*And when midday was past, they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice.* But there was no voice; no one answered, no one paid attention. Then Elijah said to all the people, ‘Come near to me.’ So all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD that was broken down” (1 Kings 18:29–30). This shows that midday was not the time of the evening sacrifice. There was time for many false prophets to do their preaching before the time for Israel’s “evening sacrifice.” At the time of the evening sacrifice, Elijah repaired the altar of the Lord, cut the sacrificial bull in pieces, and offered it on behalf of Israel—several hours after “midday” had passed (1 Kings 18:33–39)!

After the Babylonian exile, the sacrifices were being offered shortly before and shortly after noon or midday. Therefore, the Passover lamb also began to be killed not at the twilight of the evening as commanded in the Torah, but in the mid-afternoon, establishing a new worldly influenced tradition. Notice again these frank admissions from the Babylonian Talmud:

(1) Deut. XVI, 3. 'It' refers to the Passover sacrifice, which was offered on the fourteenth of Nisan *from mid-day and onwards*; and the verse is interpreted: You are to eat no leavened bread at the time that you must offer the Passover sacrifice.⁴

Consider: Since God's Word says the Passover lambs were to be killed on the fourteenth, how could this new tradition of slaughtering the lambs "from mid-day" be fulfilled and still allow the people to eat the meat on the evening of the fourteenth? It couldn't! Instead, the postexilic Jews created an amalgamation of this new understanding with the old ways and commands of the Scriptures. "Evening" came to mean any time after noon. This Babylonian confusion resulted in the practice of killing the lambs at the end of the fourteenth (between the evenings), rather than at the beginning as the Scriptures command. This practice thus necessitated eating the Paschal meal and observing its service on the fifteenth, not on the fourteenth as commanded. Let's examine the Scriptures.

Exodus 12:6 says, "Now you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month. Then the whole

assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it at twilight.”

The Hebrew word “until” is ‘*ad*, meaning “as far as, up to, until.” It does not mean “past” or “at the end of.”

According to *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon*, the word *twilight* is ‘*ereb*, meaning “evening, dusk, the close of the day, sunset, between the evening, dusk.”

That definition certainly does not fit an interpretation of anytime from six and a half hours after 6:00 A.M. (12:30 in the afternoon)!

But if tradition trumps God’s Word, then some will continue to believe the Passover lambs were killed late in the afternoon of the fourteenth, placing the actual paschal (Passover) meal with its rights and services on the fifteenth. This is the “how” and “why” Passover was transferred from the evening beginning the fourteenth to the fifteenth.

What if the same meaning of “evening” were applied to the weekly Sabbath? Think of the confusion that would result. Should the Sabbath be kept from, say, about 12:30 P.M. one day to about 12:30 P.M. the next day? Or, since some claim “evening” means anytime from six and a half hours into the day (12:30 P.M.) until dark, that could place the time of the Sabbath to any time within the final six or eight hours of the afternoon. Convenient, huh? With such human reasoning, people could “keep Sabbath” beginning from whenever they chose in the afternoon of the sixth day to whenever they chose on the afternoon of the seventh day! Confusion and lawlessness would be

the result! While one person might choose to begin their Sabbath at 12:30 P.M., another might begin theirs at 6:30. Carrying out this reasoning further, why not start your Sabbath at sunset Friday and then end your Sabbath the following day at 12:30 P.M. for a shortened Sabbath? Such reasoning sounds confusing and absurd, because it is! So why would a person want to use the same baseless human reasoning by starting the Passover at a completely different time from that of all the other feasts and Sabbaths? Why not instead just take God at His Word? Why the inconsistency with Passover? Why keep each weekly Sabbath beginning at sunset or twilight, each holy day beginning at twilight or sunset, and then suddenly change for Passover?

Does God's Word make clear what "twilight" or "evening" means? Please judge for yourselves: "You may not sacrifice the Passover within any of your gates which the LORD your God gives you; but at the place where the LORD your God chooses to make His name abide, there you shall sacrifice the *Passover at twilight, at the going down of the sun*, at the time you came out of Egypt" (Deut. 16:5–6, emphasis added).

Clearly God's Word is not ambiguous as to what was meant by "evening" or "twilight," so we should not be confused by Babylonian customs. "Twilight" means "at the going down of the sun" (Deut. 16:6).

Peter and his scribe Mark understood "evening" as being that time around and shortly after the setting of the sun—not any time after noon. Mark 1:32 says, *At evening, when the sun had set*, they brought to Him all

who were sick and those who were demon-possessed” (emphasis added).

This change from the biblical reckoning of the times of the day to that of the Gentiles also brought changes to the times of day when the sacrifices were offered. But by changing the time of the sacrifice, the date of Passover was actually transferred to the next day. Instead of the Passover lamb being kept “until the fourteenth,” specifically, *until* the beginning of the fourteenth at the twilight of evening—this new interpretation forced the observance of the Passover to the next day.

This has confused many who have recited historical proof of what was done to substantiate their belief in a Nisan 15 Passover. But those historical examples are postexilic! Notice another revealing statement about Passover from the Babylonian Talmud:

“During its (forbidden) time means during Passover. Before its time, from six hours (mid-day) on the fourteenth of Nisan until evening, when Passover commences; after its time, after Passover — i.e., leaven which was kept from before until after Passover. He transgresses by eating it.”⁵

Notice the rabbi says, “from six hours (mid-day) on the fourteenth of Nisan until evening, when Passover commences.”

If a person begins from midday on the afternoon of the fourteenth to that evening to commence Passover service—since the evening begins the next day—that, in effect, transfers Passover to the fifteenth! It's just

that simple. If that's what some believe and have been taught, fine. That's understandable. But that's not what the Word of God says, nor is it what Yeshua practiced and taught.

This is not to belittle or in put down the Talmud in any way, nor to put down in any way any rabbi, Jew, or Christian person who has been confused in these regards. The Jews have done much to preserve God's words for us all, and not all Jews have been confused in these regards. Regardless, changing the Passover falls outside their scope of responsibility, especially since keeping Passover was the charge of each head of household, and was never given to the priests or Jews to administer in the way other holy feasts were. Exodus 12:3 reads, "Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying: 'On the tenth of this month every man shall take for himself a lamb, according to the house of his father, a lamb for a household.'"

Not only did things change through the Jewish exile to and by Babylon, the *Encyclopedia Judaica* reveals other factors contributing to change as well:

"Originally, the Passover was celebrated among the families (Ex 12:21 [J]) in tents, after the territorial occupation, in hoses. After the cultic centralization of King Josiah, the celebration of the Passover was transferred to the central Sanctuary in Jerusalem..."⁶

Both Israel and Judah had drifted far away from God (2 Kings 17:19) and had thus lost the truths about

God's Holy Days and how to keep them. Israel had already been taken captive. Judah was not far behind. But Judah's time was extended a bit for David's sake and in part because of a few righteous kings, Josiah in particular (2 Kings 8:19; 22:18–20). At King Josiah's instructions, the priests were told to put the house of God in order. Things had gotten so bad that the priests were surprised to find a copy of the law in the temple (2 Kings 22:8)! They quickly read the law to the king, who ordered this new method of keeping Passover for those around the temple. Perhaps this new method was due to the people's being ceremonially unclean, or perhaps because Josiah, just learning God's Laws for the first time, did not know better. Or perhaps it was just meant as a special occasion for those in the vicinity of the temple. Regardless, Josiah, not God, was the one who hastily established this new practice.

Shortly after Josiah's death, Judah was taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (2 Kings 25). Later, the few who returned to Jerusalem from captivity brought with them the lingering influence of the Babylonians. They seem to have amalgamated their new Babylonian-influenced understandings with the last-minute changes King Josiah had made. The effects of this difference on Passover were notable. Yet many historians note that the Sadducees maintained that each man should sacrifice his own lamb on Abib 14.

Enlightening, indeed!

