

DISCOVERING THE BIBLE & OUR BIBLICAL HERITAGES

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The Passover that Jesus Knew

By Jim Myers

Three times in a year all Israelite males are to appear before Yahweh.¹ These are called *Shalosh Regalim* (the three pilgrimage festivals):

- (1) *Feast of Unleavened Bread*
- (2) *Feast of Weeks (Shavuot aka Pentecost)*
- (3) *Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot)*

Notice that **Passover** is not listed above in the feasts. Originally, **Passover** and the **Feast of Unleavened Bread** were two separate holidays:

- (1) *In the **fourteenth day of the first month** at evening is Yahweh's **Passover**.*²
- (2) *On the **fifteenth day of the first month** is the **Feast of Unleavened Bread** unto Yahweh; seven days you must eat unleavened bread.*³

At the beginning of the Babylonian exile they were combined.⁴ The Torah's laws for the observance of **Passover** and the **Feast of Unleavened Bread** are given in Exodus 12:1-28, Leviticus 23:4-8, Numbers 9:1-14, Deuteronomy 16:1-8. Below is an overview:

- (1) *This month shall be the first month of the year -- Nisan, is in the spring (March-April).*
- (2) *On the tenth of this month every man shall take for himself a lamb for a household.*
- (3) *If the household is too small for the lamb, let him and his neighbor next to his house take it.*
- (4) *The lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year (from the sheep or the goats).*
- (5) *You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month.*
- (6) *On the fourteenth of the month, the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it at twilight.*

- (7) *They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses where they eat it.*
- (8) *You shall eat it with a belt on your waist, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. So you shall eat it in haste.*
- (9) *They shall eat the flesh on that night; roasted in fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs they shall eat it.*
- (10) *Do not eat it raw, nor boiled at all with water, but roasted in fire — its head with its legs and its entrails.*
- (11) *You shall let none of it remain until morning.*
- (12) *If any of it remains until morning you shall burn it with fire.⁵*

By the time of Jesus, the way **Passover** and the **Festival of Unleavened Bread** were celebrated had evolved. The Temple was the center of activity and the rituals had to be able to accommodate and include the hundreds of thousands of pilgrims coming to Jerusalem. Festivals were very much a part of ancient life, and people were prepared to endure crowded conditions and long journeys in order to participate.

People travelled in groups to Jerusalem for the **Passover** and the other two major festivals -- *Shavuot* and *Sukkot*. The large caravans in which many travelled also protected the temple tax which they brought from lands outside of Israel.⁶ They came by land all the way from **Babylon**.⁷ Caravans and ships also brought groups of pilgrims from **Syria**, **Asia Minor** and **North Africa**.⁸ **Galileans** and **Idumaeans** also travelled in companies to Jerusalem.⁹ As the travelers walked toward the Temple they sang Psalms.

*How lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts!
My soul longs, yea faints for the courts of the Lord;
My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.¹⁰*



[SOURCE](#)

*Oh send out Your light and Your truth;
Let them lead me,
Let them bring me to Your Holy Hill
And to Your dwelling!
Then I will go to the altar of God,
To God my exceeding joy;
And I will praise You with the lyre,
O God, my God.¹¹*

*I was glad when they said to me,
'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'¹²*

There is no reason to exclude secular ditties, jokes, and more wine than usual at night on these journeys. The Jewish festivals were like Christmas: a blend of piety, good cheer, hearty eating, making

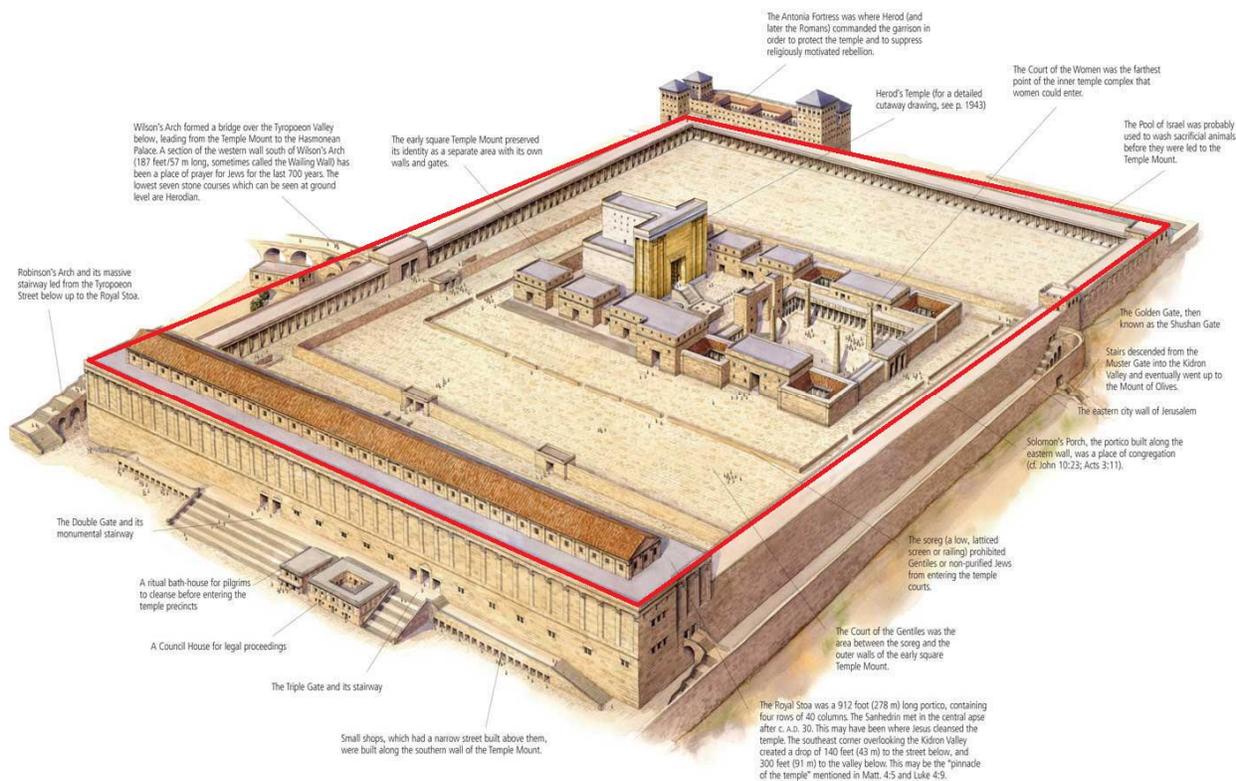
music, chatting with friends, drinking and dancing.¹³ Singing the Psalms above is something Jesus would have experienced many times in his life *ó especially on the journeys to the Temple to celebrate the festivals*. Pilgrims could see the blazing roof a long way off before they arrived in Jerusalem. Let's take a moment to define a couple of key words:

(1) **pilgrim** ó from Old French *pelerin, peregrine* "**crusader; foreigner, stranger**."¹⁴

(2) **paschal** ó from Greek *pascha* "**Passover**," from Aramaic *pasha* "**pass over**," corresponding to Hebrew *pesah*, from *pasha* "**he passed over**."

Herod's Temple was an awesome structure with walls soaring straight up as much as 120 ft. above street level. The Temple Mount enclosed a rectangular area of 35 acres. In the middle of the enclosure, the Sanctuary building rose above the rest, its gold-covered roof glowing like fire in the rays of the desert sun.¹⁵ Josephus wrote:

*"To approaching strangers [the Temple] appeared from a distance like a snow-clad mountain; for all that was not overlaid with gold was of purest white."*¹⁶



SOURCE¹⁷

When they arrived and walked to the Temple they crossed a plaza lined with shops to get to the main entrance to the Temple Mount. There was a 244 ft. wide stairway leading to the southern entrance to the Mount, but to go through the Temple's gates one was required to be ritually pure. Levites were stationed at the gates to act as guards for security purposes as well as being responsible for maintaining ritual purity by checking visitors.

The festive atmosphere started on the road, but the true feast came in Jerusalem. Today, we often put activities like this in an exclusively ðreligious boxö and view the participants through that lens. But, people are people and their trips to the Temple were also their main opportunity for `splurgingø during the year. It was a religious pilgrimage that also included shopping. Pilgrims had their ðsecond titheö money to spend and it could only be spent in Jerusalem:¹⁸

*for whatever you desire, oxen, or sheep, or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves; and you shall eat there before the Lord your God and rejoice, you and your household.*¹⁹

In the first century C.E., when pilgrims arrived in Jerusalem, they frequently encountered money changers and merchants around the Jerusalem temple. Merchants sold animals for temple sacrifices; it was easier for travelers to buy an animal near the temple than to bring one along. When Jews traveled to Jerusalem from other lands, they brought money for room, board, and souvenirs. Most importantly, they were required to pay the annual half-shekel tribute to the temple. The currency they had would be of their native land or acquired in trade along their way. Money changers performed a key service when they converted the varieties of local coinage into the required tribute of silver shekels of half-shekels of Tyre.²⁰

Jerusalem had its artisans, bakers, launderers, butchers or poulterers, weavers, fullers, and smiths. The artisans would greet the pilgrims with such words as: "Brethren of such-and-such place, you have come in peace (i.e., "welcome"). It is very likely that their shops and workshops were located along a main street where the people were likely to pass. In addition to the above, there were a number of industries that appear to have flourished in Jerusalem owing to its status as a temple-city. One was olive and olive oil production. The centrality of this commodity is most evident from the names of locales in and around the city, all attesting to the importance of olives -- the Mount of Olives to the East (Mark 11:1), Gethsemane (literally "olive press" Mark 14:32 and the neighborhood Bezetha (literally "house or place of the olive"). Spice dealers, linen makers and goldsmith were also identifiable parts of the city.²¹

There are a wide range of figures for the population of Jerusalem around 30 CE, but most scholars place it at around 40,000 regular residents. But during the *shalosh regalim* (three pilgrimage festivals each year), which all Israelite males were to appear before Yahweh,²² the number of pilgrims added another 300,000 to 500,000 people.²³ There were many things going on in and around Jerusalem other than the religious rituals. Consider the fact that 250,000 to 500,000 pilgrims were added to the resident population and they had to eat, sleep and do all of the other things humans do on a daily basis. Some of the pilgrims slept in Jerusalem, while others stayed in nearby villages or in tents around the city. Pilgrims came to make new friends as well as renew old friendships on these journeys.²⁴ They came to browse among the masses of merchants and buy things they could take back home. It was an environment in which there was a great deal of activity, festivity, and many opportunities to encounter and interact.

In an effort to facilitate contact between those in the city and those in the Temple, and to ease the difficulty of pilgrimage to the Temple, laws regarding uncleanness were relaxed on the feasts in Jerusalem and even within the Temple.²⁵ Ritual immersion was an important part of ritual purity. The Temple was filled with dozens of Jewish ritual baths (known in Hebrew as *mikvaot*) for the purpose of ritual purification.²⁶ These installations, however, could not have met the needs of tens of thousands of

Jewish pilgrims attending the festivities at the Temple. It appears that the **Bethesda and Siloam Pools** to the north and south of the Temple Mount were designed to accommodate almost all of the ritual purification needs of the large numbers of Jewish pilgrims who flocked to Jerusalem for the festivals.²⁷

The huge stairway on the South side of the Temple was called the "**stairs of the rabbis**." This was where elders and teachers, including Rabbi Gamaliel who was said to have been the teacher of Paul, gathered to discuss legal questions and make religious decisions.²⁸ This would have no doubt been a favorite stopping place for Jesus on his trips to the Temple. On the major feasts days, all priests from all divisions could make pilgrimage, and all of them were entitled to the festal offerings. The special feature of Passover in the Temple was the slaughter of the paschal lamb by all worshippers, inhabitants of Jerusalem and pilgrims alike.

At midnight the Temple gates were opened to the people and before the sun rose the Temple court was already filled with Israelites. *The special feature of Passover at the Temple was the slaughter of the paschal lamb by all worshippers.*²⁹ Obviously, there was simply not enough space and time for every family to sacrifice a lamb in the Temple. Therefore, group sacrifices of single lambs were done in the Temple by a few, while most sacrifices were done outside the Temple.

The lamb was sacrificed on the 14th of Nisan, on the eve of Passover, at the ninth hour (about 3 pm) of the day. The *Mishnah* (Oral Law) describes the activities that took place within the Temple. Those who wished to sacrifice formed groups, each of which slaughtered one paschal lamb for the entire group. The priests allowed the **Court of the Israelites** to be filled three times. The paschal lamb, unlike with the usual animal-offerings, was sacrificed by the Israelites themselves. As with all peace-offerings, it was offered in the inner court and its blood tossed on the altar. After one group completed the ritual, the doors were opened again and the next group entered. The lambs were then eaten in the households and courtyards throughout the city.³⁰

At the close of the first festival-day, the people participated in the harvesting of the barley sheaves. These usually came from **Beth Makleh**, beside the **Kidron brook**, but if, due to the late arrival of winter, it proved difficult to find ripe barley nearby, and the sheaves thus could not be harvested in this area, they were brought from afar.³¹ The Torah states that the barley should be waved the morrow after the Shabbat and that a count should be made for seven weeks until the morrow after the seventh Sabbath, when the Feast of Shavuot (Pentecost) was to be celebrated.³² This created a conflict between the Sadducees and Pharisees.³³

The Sadducees interpreted the morrow after the Shabbat to mean literally the day after the first Shabbat after Passover (the very next Sunday).

The Pharisees interpreted the term "Shabbat" as "festival" and taught that the sheaves should be brought on the morrow of the first day of Passover (the 16th of Nisan).

The worshippers could spend their nights outside Jerusalem until the day of sacrifice of the paschal lamb. But on that night they were required to remain in Jerusalem for the night.³⁴ Matthew records Yeshua's activities during this period. Before the feast Yeshua stayed outside Jerusalem, but with the approach of Passover he told his disciples to go to one of the inhabitants of the city and fix a place for their meal. Even though the townsman is not necessarily a follower of Jesus, he and his disciples are welcomed to his house as a matter of course.³⁵

It is not clear whether pilgrims were obliged to remain in Jerusalem throughout the seven days of Passover and the eight days of Sukkot, but many traditions from the time of the Temple take it for granted that they remained until the end of the feast-days.³⁶ The feasts created many opportunities for the multitudes to interact with Jesus, as well as many other teachers *ó and others who claimed to be the messiah*. It also made it possible for them to go to the Temple and listen to the scribes discuss and teach from the Torah, as well as go to the *Stairs of the Rabbis* and listen to their views. *The primary focus of the scribes, teachers and rabbis would have most likely been on the correct way to do the laws of the festivals*. When the pilgrims returned they probably shared what they had learned from those teachers, as well as their other experiences in Jerusalem and on the journey with their neighbors.

With the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, the offering of the paschal lamb came to an end. During the period between 70 and 200 CE, the synagogue and home became the center for the practice of rituals that had been exclusively done at the Temple. New ways had to be created to make it possible for the laws of the Torah to be done. Today, a book called the *Haggadah* (from the Hebrew root "to tell") serves as the liturgy and guidebook for the *seder* (the rituals of the Passover meal). Yeshua did not use a *Haggadah* or participate in a *seder* meal like those done today.

The first documented evidence of parts of the *Haggadah* is found in the *Mishnah* (Oral Law edited ca. 200 CE). The arrangement of the table, the psalms, benedictions, and other recited matter of today coincide substantially with the program laid down in the *Mishnah*. *Midrashim* (commentaries) were added and most of the version we now have was completed by the end of the Talmudic period (500-600 CE). Evidence of the wide acceptance of the *Haggadah* was its inclusion in *Rav Amram's siddur* (prayerbook) in the eighth century CE.

Let me repeat, it is important to understand that the *Passover* Jesus knew and participated in was not the same experience as the *Passover* of Rabbinic Judaism today. The focus in Jesus's time period was on correctly doing the laws of the Torah, something that in many cases today is impossible because there is no Temple or functional priesthood. Today, the focus is more about remembering the lessons of the past than on how to literally do the laws of the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

I hope you learned something from this about the Passover experience of Jesus and his people. Religions evolve change over time and that is just the way it is for most things that humans are involved in. Passover begins on April 3, 2015 at sunset and last for seven days. Take time to remember your religious and spiritual heritage *ó and the wisdom and values you received from them*.



לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם:
Next Year in Jerusalem!

BHC

April Memorials

In Loving Memory

**WILLIAM
LESTER
STEWART**

d. April 26, 2005

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete SHALOM
forever!*

In Loving Memory

**CHARLES L.
“CHUCK”
GREGORY**

b. January 25, 1925
d. April 11, 2010

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete SHALOM
forever!*

In Their Remembrance

*May their memories inspire us to
seek those qualities of mind and
heart which they shared when we
walked life's journey together.*

*May we help to bring closer to
fulfillment their highest ideals and
noblest strivings.*

*May their memories deepen our
loyalty to those things which we
valued and shared --
faith, love, peace and devotion
and our biblical heritage.*

*As long as we live, they too will
live; for they are now a part of us,
as we remember them.*

(Inspired from prayers found in Yitzhor
Reflections - The New Mahzor - The Prayer
Book Press)

In Loving Memory

**GEORGE
WASHINGTON
HARLESS**

b. October 1864
d. April 6, 1923

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete SHALOM
forever!*

John P. Gargiulo of North Salem, NY, a long-time friend and associate of the Biblical Heritage Center, passed away on the evening of March 13, 2015 at his home surrounded by his loving family. John served in the U.S. Navy during World War II and afterwards had a longtime successful career in Insurance sales and financial planning. He was a biblical scholar as well as an accomplished biblical teacher. His ministry spanned 35+ years and continued throughout his life. He touched many lives with his ministry in the NYC, Westchester, Putnam, NY and Fairfield, Connecticut County areas. John will be missed by many.

Remembering those who came before us is a very important part of the Biblical Heritage Center's mission. It is our privilege to honor them by the BHC Memorial Garden and Memorials which are printed in this newsletter. The Memorial Garden is on the website at <http://www.biblicalheritage.org>. Please visit it the next time you are on the Internet and stop back by often. If you would like to add your loved one to this section, send the information to us. There is no charge, but donations are accepted. Remember those who have meant so much to you with a BHC Memorial.

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- ¹ Deuteronomy 16:16
² Leviticus 23:5
³ Leviticus 23:6
⁴ *Encyclopaedia Judaica* Vol. 13, p. 169.
⁵ Exodus 12:1-12
⁶ *Judaism: Practice & Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE* By E. P. Sanders© 1992; Trinity Press, Philadelphia, PA; p. 128.
⁷ *Josephus, Antiq.* 17.313
⁸ *Spec. Laws* 1.69
⁹ Josephus, War 2.232
¹⁰ Psalm 84.1
¹¹ Psalm 43.3
¹² Psalm 122.1
¹³ *Judaism: Practice & Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE* By E. P. Sanders© 1992; Trinity Press, Philadelphia, PA; p. 128.
¹⁴ <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=pilgrim>
¹⁵ <http://www.totheends.com/clean.html>
¹⁶ Josephus, War 5.5.6
¹⁷ <http://www.centuryone.com/images/illustration-Temple-Mount.jpg>
¹⁸ *Judaism: Practice & Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE*; p. 129.
¹⁹ Deuteronomy 14.26
²⁰ <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/commerce-and-the-temple-in-first-century-jerusalem.aspx>
²¹ *Jerusalem: Portrait of the City in the Second Temple Period (538 B.C.E. – 70 C.E.)* by Lee I. Levine (Jewish Publication Society 2002) 345-346 (Google Books)
²² Deuteronomy 16:16
²³ *Judaism: Practice & Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE*; p. 128.
²⁴ *The Jewish People in the First Century Volume Two*; p. 903
²⁵ *The Jewish People in the First Century Volume Two: Historical Geography, Political History, Social Culture and Religious Life and Institutions*; Edited by S. Safrai and M. Stern in co-operation with D. Flusser and E. C. van Unnik; © 1976 By Stichting Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum Testamentum; Fprtress Press, Philadelphia, PA;p.891.
²⁶ <http://www.totheends.com/clean.html>
²⁷ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/mikveh.html>
²⁸ <http://www.totheends.com/clean.html>
²⁹ *The Jewish People in the First Century Volume Two: Historical Geography, Political History, Social Culture and Religious Life and Institutions*; Edited by S. Safrai and M. Stern in co-operation with D. Flusser and E. C. van Unnik; © 1976 By Stichting Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum Testamentum; Fprtress Press, Philadelphia, PA;p.891-892.
³⁰ *The Jewish People in the First Century Volume Two*; p. 892
³¹ *The Jewish People in the First Century Volume Two*; p. 892
³² Leviticus 23:11-16
³³ *The Jewish People in the First Century Volume Two*; p. 893
³⁴ *The Jewish People in the First Century Volume Two*; p. 904
³⁵ Matthew 26:17-18
³⁶ *The Jewish People in the First Century Volume Two*; p. 904

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