

The Spring Festivals

Passover in Egypt and Jerusalem

by
Dean & Susan Wheelock

And thus 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.
It is the LORD's Passover.
Exodus 12:11

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- The Complete Jewish Bible (CJB)*,
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Clarksville, MD/Jerusalem, 1998.
- The Holy Bible - King James Version (KJV)*
Oxford University Press
London
- The Open Bible (New King James Version [NKJV])*,
Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, 1985.
- The Tanakh (TNK)*,
Jewish Publication Society,
Philadelphia/New York, 1988

~ A Story of Religious ~ ~ Freedom ~

We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt,
And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand;
And the LORD showed signs and wonders Before our eyes,
Great and severe, against Egypt,
Pharaoh, and all his household.
Deuteronomy 6:21-22

The most cherished freedom that man can possess is religious freedom, to be free to worship the Creator God in "spirit and in truth." To most of us living in the western world of twentieth century civilization, religious freedom is pretty much taken for granted. Yet there are many places today where people are not free to worship the Creator God in the manner they believe to be correct. For example, China currently remains one of the principle nations where people are continually denied their religious freedom. There are also many Christians being persecuted in the fundamentalist Islamic nation of Iran. Jail and torture are the common methods used to force them to recant their belief that Jesus (*Y'shua*) is the Messiah, thereby forcing them to return to the Moslem faith.

Where exactly did religious freedom originate? Was it really in Philadelphia's Independence Hall in 1789 when the First Congress wrote the Bill of Rights that guaranteed religious freedom to the citizens of the new nation of the United States of America? Or, in fact, was religious freedom an issue many millennia earlier when the children of Israel were still subject to the Pharaoh of Egypt? Just what was the motive behind the cry "**Let my people go!**" True, a great motive was to escape physical slavery, but was not the freedom to worship God in the manner in which He reveals Himself also a primary motivation?

One cannot truly understand the Exodus story except in the context of religious freedom. But freedom has many facets to it. With freedom comes obligations. Our Messiah *Y'shua* said:

"...If you abide in My word, you are my disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."
(John 8:31-32)

Free from what? Free from the need to worship God at all? Free to worship in any bizarre way imaginable? That is not what *Y'shua* had in mind when He made the above statement. The people to whom He was talking thought they were already free:

"They answered Him, 'We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say, 'You will be made free?'"

"Jesus [*Y'shua*] answered them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, Whoever commits sin is the slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house for ever: but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.'"
(John 8:33-36)

The lesson never learned by the children of Israel as they trudged through the wilderness, was that with true religious freedom comes equally true obligations. This is also the lesson that has not been learned by our modern societies, where religious freedom means:

"...everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

(Judges 21:25)

As we study the Passover, the Exodus, and the religious observances that emanated from that experience, we must always remember that obligation and obedience to the truth of God, as revealed in the Scriptures, are the legitimate daughters of religious freedom. License to sin, even in the guise of religion, is the illegitimate daughter which results from the casting off of true religion. In this manner 'religious freedom' becomes not true freedom, but a subtle kind of slavery to sin and to death.

If the children of Israel had only experienced Passover and the Exodus, they would have been liberated from their physical bondage. However, because they went on to Mt. Sinai and received the *Torah*, the instruction book of God, they were given the opportunity to experience true religious freedom, which is being able to freely give oneself to God in the fullest sense of the word. This can only be achieved when one accepts an obedient lifestyle to the standards set by Almighty God, and this lifestyle must be based upon the *Torah*. Once this crucial step is taken, then the redemption that comes through faith in Messiah can find full expression in Believers by the manner in which they live their lives.

~ The Roots of Passover ~

In order to fully appreciate the story of the Passover and the Exodus, we must go back in time four hundred and thirty years to the days of Abram (Heb. *Avram* = Ahv-rahm') who's name was later changed to *Avraham* (Ahv-rah-hahm'). God chose *Avram*, out of all men alive in the world at that time, to be the progenitor of a race of people that would be special to Him. We pick up the story at the point where God revealed Himself to *Avram*.

"Now the LORD [*YHVH*] had said to Abram:

'Get out of your country,

From your kindred

And from your father's house,

To a land that I will show you.

I will make you a great nation;

I will bless you

And make your name great;

And you shall be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you,

And I will curse him who curses you;

And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."
(Gen. 12:1-3)

Avram trusted God and departed from his father's house. He, along with his wife *Sarai* (Sah-rye') and his nephew *Lot* (Loht), moved into the land of Canaan and from that day forward lived in tents as strangers in a strange land.

Avram was very familiar with the idolatry of the Canaanites since he had grown up in the city of Ur of the Chaldees where (according to tradition) his father had been a manufacturer of idols as well as an official in the court of King Nimrod. However, (again according to tradition) *Avram*, at a very early age, forsook the idolatry of his father and began to search for and serve the one true God, then known as *El Shaddai* (Ehl Shahd-die' = God Almighty) the Creator of the universe. *Avram* was seventy-five years old when God first spoke directly to him, as recorded in the above passage.

Later, in the spring of that same year (the ancient calendar began in the fall), God again engaged *Avram* in conversation and instituted a formal agreement with him. This covenant is commonly known as the *Covenant Between the Parts*.

"After these things the word of the LORD [YHVH] came to Abram in a vision, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.'"
(Gen. 15:1)

Avram protested that he was childless and wondered out loud how the promise would be fulfilled. God assured him that a physical child would be forthcoming from his own loins. However, God did not specify at this time who would be the mother. Not only would *Avram* have an heir, he would have a multitude of heirs:

"Then He brought him outside and said, 'Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.'"
(Gen. 15:5)

It was at this very point where *Avram* displayed that firm, trusting, belief that God could and would do what He had promised, even though *Sarai*, who had been barren all of her life, was now beyond the time in life when she could naturally bear children. It is for this reason, and this reason alone, that God considered *Avram* to be righteous.

"And he believed in the LORD [YHVH], and He accounted it to him for righteousness."
(Gen. 15:6)

So now, *Avram* believed that he would have a multitude of descendants, as many as the stars in heaven. But God made an additional promise. Not only would *Avram* be the progenitor of many people, they would also inherit the land of the Canaanites.

"Then He said to him, 'I am the LORD [YHVH] who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it.'

"And he said, 'Lord, GOD, how shall I know that I will inherit it?'"
(Gen. 15:7-8)

~ Cutting the Covenant ~

What followed was a formal covenant procedure as was commonly made between parties at that time. God instructed *Avram*:

"...Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.'

"Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two."
(Gen. 15:9-10)

This ancient ceremony is where the modern term 'cutting a covenant' originated. The animals were slaughtered and cut in half. One half of each animal was placed on one side of a path, while the other halves were placed on the other side of the path. The two parties would walk together, side by side between the parts of the slaughtered animals. This action made the profound statement that if either party was to ever break the agreed upon terms of the covenant, they would expect to have their bodies cut asunder just as had been done to the animals.

The next verse seems rather incidental and pointless. Yet it is the inspired word of God and there is a reason for its inclusion.

"And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away."
(Gen. 15:11)

How often have each of us made a commitment to God and then had the 'vultures' try and dissuade us from holding to that commitment? It was a credit to *Avram's* faith that he worked diligently to keep the vultures from devouring the covenant sacrifice and thereby nullifying the promise.

"Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him."

"Then He said to Abram: 'Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.'"
(Gen. 15:12-16)

According to tradition, during his deep sleep *Avram* saw in vision all of the difficulties which were to fall upon his descendants, including the harsh slavery they were to be subjected to in Egypt. This is why **"...horror and great darkness fell upon him."** Many people desire to see into the future, but *Avram's* experience shows us that such a view might be better hidden from our eyes:

"... sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."
(Matt. 6:34)

However, "all's well that ends well," and *Avram's* descendants were prophesied to eventually come out of that slavery experience with great abundance. This is, of course, a direct prophesy of the Exodus which was to take place a full four hundred and thirty years later:

"But God spoke in this way: that his descendants would sojourn in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress them four hundred years."
(Acts 7:6)

"And it came to pass at the end of the four hundred and thirty years -- on that very same day -- it came to pass

that all the armies of the LORD [YHVH] went out from the land of Egypt." (Ex. 12:40)

"And this I say, that the law (Torah), which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ [Messiah], that it should make the promise of no effect." (Gal. 3:17)

At first glance, this all seems rather puzzling. God said they will be oppressed for four hundred years, then two scriptures (Ex. 12:40 and Gal. 3:17) confirm that it was a full four hundred and thirty years from the cutting of the *Covenant Between the Parts* until the Exodus.

The explanation is really rather simple. The prophecy in Gen. 15:13 specifically addresses the length of time during which *Avram's* heirs would suffer persecution in a land that was not theirs. Since, at that time, *Avram* was not yet a father, the persecution of his descendants cannot be counted from the date of the *Covenant Between the Parts*.

So when did the persecution begin? According to Jewish tradition it began the day *Yitzhak* (Yeet'-zhak) was born. But his birth was to come only twenty-five years after this time, not the required thirty years. The Jews get around this problem by saying that the events of Gen. 12:1-3 took place five years before verses 4-5. This scenario holds that *Avram* would have been seventy years old when God first appeared to him and it was at this time when *Avram* and his father left Ur of the Chaldees to settle in Haran. They go on to claim that *Avram* left Haran five years later, moving into Canaan when he was seventy-five years old. This view has one problem. *Avram* was told to leave his father's house. According to the above scenario he waited five full years before making this move. Yet the scripture seems to indicate that he left immediately:

"So Abram departed as the LORD [YHVH] had spoken to him ... And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran." (Gen. 12:4)

It is this writer's opinion that a better solution to the problem is found in the following passage:

"So the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the same day that Isaac (*Yitzhak*) was weaned.

"And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, scoffing. Therefore she said to Abraham, 'Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, namely Isaac.'" (Gen. 21:8-10)

While it may seem strange by modern standards (when many babies are not even breast fed) for a child to not be weaned until the age of five, it is not an unheard of custom in some cultures even to this day. However, it is here that scripture records the persecution to have begun. According to tradition, Ishmael brought idols into the tent of *Avraham* and *Sarah*. He also shot arrows at *Yitzhak* pretending to be shooting at a bird, because he was jealous, knowing that *Yitzhak* was heir to the promise. It is also interesting to note that tradition tells us *Yitzhak* was born on *Nisan 15* and that the Weaning Feast was held on his birthday. If this initial act

of persecution is, in fact, a full thirty years after the cutting of the *Covenant Between the Parts*, and it began on *Nisan 15*, then a full four hundred years of persecution would bring us to the very day of the Exodus.

Based on this scenario, further chronological study reveals that the children of Israel spent a total of two-hundred and fifteen years in Egypt. (The Jewish scenario says it was two-hundred and ten years.) The actual amount of time they were in total slavery cannot be definitely known. Again, the Jews say the children of Israel lived ninety-four years in Egypt before slavery and one hundred sixteen years in bondage. These lengths seem about right, but if one holds to the two-hundred and fifteen year theory, then it is necessary to add five years to one of those figures. Since the children of Israel were already in slavery when Moses was born, and he did not return to lead them out of slavery until he was eighty years old, it stands to reason that they had to have been in slavery in excess of eighty years.

~ Sealing the Covenant ~

Now back to the *Covenant Between the Parts*:

"And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there was a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces.

"On the same day the LORD [YHVH] made a covenant with Abram, saying: 'To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates--...'" (Gen. 15:17-18)

Please note that *Avram* never did walk between the parts. Apparently he was asleep. If not asleep, he merely watched as God, in the form of a **"...smoking oven and a burning torch..."**, cut the covenant entirely on His own. This fact is confirmed in the *Brit Chadasha* (Breet Khah-deh-shah' = the Renewed Covenant):

"For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, ..." (Heb. 6:13)

The *Covenant Between the Parts* did not depend upon *Avram* or anything he or his descendants might do, it depended entirely upon the promise of Almighty God (*El Shaddai*). Let us never forget this great truth as it has profound meaning to all Believers. The promise of salvation is dependent entirely upon the promise of God and the sacrifice of *Y'shua*.

Undoubtedly the **"...smoking oven and ... burning torch..."** devoured the sacrificial offerings that *Avram* had prepared. Since this same night would eventually be the Passover, it was important that what remained of the prepared animals be completely burned before morning. It is interesting to note that the selection of animals and birds for this sacrifice cover many of the flesh sacrifices that would later be instituted by God as a part of the Levitical system. The heifer can stand for both the red heifer sacrifice (Num. 16) and the burnt offering (Lev. 1). The female goat is a satisfactory 'peace offering' and 'trespass offering,' the 'peace offering' being the exact same type of sacrifice as the Passover lamb except it had to be a male. (Lev. 3 and 5). The birds were also legal for

'trespass offerings' (Lev. 5), while the ram was often used for special offerings on Festivals.

One last comment, the "...smoking oven and ... burning torch..." are also reminders of the Exodus when God led and protected the children of Israel:

"And the LORD [YHVH] went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night."

(Ex. 13:21)

The parallels between this first recorded 'Passover' type and the Passover of Exodus are quite phenomenal:

- ◆ Both events occurred on the very same night of the year.
- ◆ The animals were slaughtered in the afternoon and were consumed at night.
- ◆ The *Covenant Between the Parts* prophesied the length of time the persecution would last, while the Passover/Exodus brought that persecution to a close.
- ◆ In both cases, it was the power of God which brought the event to pass. The sole responsibility of *Avram*, and the children of Israel, was to step out in faith.
- ◆ The vultures tried to devour the sacrifice in Canaan while the 'vultures,' in the form of Pharaoh and his army, tried to devour the children of Israel.

~ ~ ~

~ The Egyptian ~ ~ Passover ~

On the fourteenth day
Of the first month at twilight
Is the LORD's Passover.
Leviticus 23:5



At this point the story shifts to the land of Egypt. Almost three hundred and fifty years had elapsed since the Covenant was initiated by God in the land of Canaan. During that time *Yitzhak* (Isaac) suffered the persecutions of his half-brother Ishmael, *Ya'akov* (Jacob) endured the deceptions of Laban and the hatred of Esau, and *Yoseif* (Joseph) was sold into slavery by his own brothers and spent ten years in an Egyptian prison. Exactly what took place after the children of Israel moved to Egypt, and all of the twelve sons of *Ya'akov* died, is unclear. However, a few facts are known from scripture and some additional things can be pieced together from secular historical records and speculation.

It is known that sometime during the second millennium BCE, (Before the Common Era) Egypt was conquered by a Semitic tribe from Asia called the *Hyksos* (Hick'-sohs) Exact dates are difficult to determine in Egyptian history, but this change in government is believed to have taken place about

1720 BCE. It is probable that the *Hyksos* were already in power when *Yoseif* (Joseph) was taken there as a slave. The high regard Pharaoh had for *Yoseif*, and why he was so readily put into the position of second in command (right below the Pharaoh himself) over the entire nation of Egypt, can be partially explained by the fact that they both came from the same racial stock. The *Hyksos* rulers may have known the ancestral family of *Yoseif* by reputation, if not in actual fact. Of course, the primary reason *Yoseif* was vaulted into a position of power was because God wanted him placed there.

But times change. Sometime after the death of *Yoseif*, the Egyptians rose up in rebellion against the Semitic *Hyksos* and took back control of their government, placing one of their own people into the office of Pharaoh. According to historians, the *Hyksos* then left Egypt and returned to their homeland in the east. However, the children of Israel remained as sheep herders in the land of Goshen.

At some point the new government decided to do something about the 'Israeli problem' which was being perceived as a growing threat within their country. (Sound familiar?) For one thing, the Israelites were speedily growing in number, as a result of the blessings of fertility given them by Almighty God.

Race was another factor. The children of Israel were descended from one of Noah's preferred sons, Shem, while the Egyptians are descended from *Mitzraim* (Meetz-rye-eem) the son of Ham, who had seen "...the nakedness of his father (Noah)..." (Gen. 9:23). (In the scriptures the Hebrew name for Egypt is *Mitzraim*.) Since the Israelites were also distant relatives of the *Hyksos*, it would be natural for the Egyptians to fear that they might rise up in rebellion against the Egyptians should the *Hyksos* decide to return:

"And Joseph died, all his brothers, and all that generation.

"But the children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly, multiplied and grew exceedingly mighty; and the land was filled with them.

"Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, 'Look, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we; come, let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply, and it happen, in the event of war, that they also join our enemies and fight against us, and so go up out of the land.'"

(Ex. 1:6-10)

The solution was to bring the children of Israel into a system of slavery and have them perform all of the undesirable work, so the Egyptians could enjoy a higher standard of living. (There really is nothing new under the sun.):

"Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh supply cities, Pithom and Raamses."

(Ex. 1:11)

Many have wondered how the Egyptians could enslave a vigorous people who were greater in number than their oppressors. According to the *Midrash* (a collection of stories and legends of the Jews) it was done in a very subtle way.

First the Pharaoh announced his intention to begin an extensive building program. He offered the children of Israel

high wages to become a part of the construction team, selling the idea as a patriotic thing to do. Pharaoh even participated personally for a short time as a public relations gesture. Initially, native Egyptians labored right along side of the Israelite workers, both of whom were paid handsomely. In addition, there was a 'mixed multitude' of people; workers from many countries and several different ethnic groups, both Semitic and non-Semitic. However, as time went on, the Egyptian workers began to disappear, a few each day, until only the Israelites and the 'mixed multitude' were left on the job site. It was already too late when the children of Israel discovered that the missing Egyptians had become armed and trained into an army of taskmasters. To make matters even worse, the Israelites were required to give back all of the money they had 'earned' during the first sixteen months of the project. But God was still with them, even if they did not realize it at that time:

"But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew. And they were in dread of the children of Israel. So the Egyptians made the children of Israel serve with rigor." (Ex. 1:12-13)

In order to stop the Israelite population explosion, the Pharaoh instituted the first recorded practice of genocide. He decreed that the midwives kill all of the male babies born to Hebrew women. To their everlasting credit, the midwives refused to obey this harsh command:

"Therefore God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and grew very mighty. And so it was, because the midwives feared God, that He provided households for them." (Ex. 1:20-21)

~ The Abuse of Total Slavery ~

It is difficult for us today to be able to imagine the horrible conditions faced by the children of Israel after they became enslaved in Egypt. Yet, if we are to fully understand the magnitude of God's redemptive act through the Passover, we must try and place ourselves into 'their shoes.' This has all been recorded for us so that we might understand the even greater magnitude of God's redemptive power in our own lives. There was a redemption from physical slavery and idolatry bringing them into religious freedom; yet they all went on to die. Ours is a redemption from a different kind of idolatry (which leads to the slavery of sin and death) and moves us on into the freedom of eternal life:

"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." (II Tim. 3:16-17)

Now then, let us try and step back in time and enter the land of Egypt as Hebrews in the era of the birth of Moses.

Only the older people could remember what it was like to be free. They spoke to their children of those ancient times in the dark of night, because during the daylight hours they were under the ever watchful eye of their taskmasters. The younger men and woman knew only the life of slavery for that is what

they were born into. They had to rise well before dawn, eat a hasty meal, and then go off to the construction site. Work went on until sunset, then they went home to do what ever chores needed to be accomplished before partaking of another simple meal and falling into bed. In all likelihood the women and children had to pick up the responsibilities for care of the flocks and herds, and the tilling of the gardens as well as all of their household chores. To top this off, the routine went on seven days a week without a break. Day in -- day out, week in -- week out, month in -- month out, year in -- year out.

To make matters worse, when a day off was allowed, the children of Israel were required to participate in the idolatrous worship of one of the many false gods held in reverence by the Egyptians. The God of their fathers, *Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov* could not be worshipped on the Sabbath day, because they had to work on the Sabbath. Yet the old traditional stories about the Patriarchs, and all that God had done for them, were passed down from generation to generation.

God, in the midst of this, blessed the children of Israel because of the promise that He had made to their fathers, and the Israelites grew strong and healthy and increased in number. The Egyptians lived in fear of the day when the Hebrews would rise up in rebellion against them and overwhelm them by their great numbers.

Next came the harsh decrees. All male babies were to be killed so the population explosion of the Hebrews could be thwarted and future potential Hebrew soldiers could be eliminated. They wanted to keep the girls around so they could give birth to more girls. Those girls could then become the slaves of the future, or serve as concubines to the Egyptian men. However, the midwives refused to cooperate, and made up stories about the vigor of the Hebrew women, saying they did not need the assistance of a midwife in order to bear children:

"And the midwives said to Pharaoh, 'Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are lively and give birth before the midwives come to them.'

"So Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying, 'Every son who is born you shall cast into the river, and every daughter you shall save alive.' (Ex. 1:19,22)

The river Nile was considered by the Egyptians to be one of their many gods. In effect, the Pharaoh decreed that all of the male Hebrew children be sacrificed to the god of the Nile.

~ Enter Moses ~

This was the world into which Moses (Heb. *Moshe* = Moh-shay') was born. A tiny baby, brought into the world, entirely dependent upon his parents to provide for his every need, not knowing anything about the world into which he was being born or the great task that God had prepared for him to do.

Moshe's father was named *Amram* (Ahm-rahm') and his mother was named *Jochebed* (Heb. *Yocheved* = Yoh'-kheh-vehd) (Num. 26:59)). *Amram* was the son of *Kohath*, and the grandson of *Levi* (Ex. 6:16,18). They already had two other children. *Miriam* (Meer-ee-ahm') and *Aaron* (Ah-rohn').