

The Prophetic Significance of the Passover Lamb

Tomorrow evening, Jews the world over will gather in their homes for the ritual feast known as the Passover Seder. The Seder rituals and liturgy are among the earliest of all Jewish texts and practices, dating from second temple times. Of course, after the destruction of the temple almost 2000 years ago, the Seder underwent one major change. Without a temple in Jerusalem, no longer would there be a Passover lamb. This roasted lamb was the centerpiece of the Seder in temple times. Today a festive meal, minus the lamb, sits at the center of the evening.

Psalms of praise are sung both before and after the meal is eaten. A close look at these psalms will reveal a powerful message about the true meaning of Passover. The psalms in question, Psalms 113 through 118, are well known to Jews as *Hallel*—the Psalms of Praise. They are sung as part of the synagogue worship on all major Jewish holy days. They are a set; a series that is always recited together—except at the Passover Seder.

Immediately before the serving of the meal—or the eating of the lamb in Temple times—Psalms 113 and 114 are sung. After the meal is concluded, the singing continues with Psalms 115 through 118.

Because these six psalms are always sung as a single uninterrupted set, the fact that they are interrupted with the Passover Seder meal is a very significant and noticeable exception.

A closer look at this unusual division of the *Hallel* psalms, we will discover a meaningful lesson not only about Passover, but about what it means to live a life of faith in God.

The first two psalms in the series, 113 and 114, speak of how God runs the world. He is in control of the history of nations (113:4); yet He takes care of needy individuals as well (113:6-9). Specifically, He redeems His people Israel (114:1-2). He manipulates the natural order and performs miracles as only the creator is capable (114:3-8).

As I mentioned, these two psalms are sung before the meal. Their connection to Passover is obvious. No Biblical event displays God's control of history, His dominance of nature, and His covenantal relationship to Israel as does the Exodus from Egypt. Psalm 114 actually mentions the Exodus explicitly. Eating the Passover meal immediately after these two psalms clearly positions the meal as a celebration of these historical events.

But what about the four psalms that follow the meal, Psalms 115-118? What connection do they have to the Exodus? They don't mention the Exodus even once.

Psalm 115 dramatically begins with the words, "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Your name give glory." In other words, God's control of nations, His redemption of His people and His miraculous manipulations of nature are not for Israel's sake at all; *they are for the glory of God*. This theme continues throughout Psalm 115.

In Psalm 116, this same theme is framed in terms of personal faith. In this psalm, the individual psalmist comes to realize that even his own personal salvation is meant not for his own sake but only to bring more glory to the Lord. *God's hand in my own life is supposed to spur me on to share my faith with others*. This is the theme of Psalm 116. The ultimate fulfillment of this mission is described by Psalm 117; "Praise the Lord, all you nations! Exalt Him, all you peoples! ..." This is the mission of all who live with faith—to bring faith to all the earth. Psalm 118 closes out these themes by depicting the nation of Israel as a single individual who is sharing His

story of redemption with others in the context of a thanksgiving offering in the Temple in Jerusalem.

In short, the theme of the four psalms that are sung after the Seder meal is this: Our salvation—both collectively and individually—is not meant for our purposes at all. It is our responsibility as servants of the Lord to use our personal redemption to serve His purposes in building the kingdom of heaven on earth.

So why does the meal interrupt the *Hallel* Psalms where it does? The answer is simple and powerful.

This may come as a surprise to many readers, but the Passover lamb not actually a sacrifice. In fact, the usual Biblical Hebrew word *Korban*—sacrifice—does not appear in reference to the Passover lamb even once! Furthermore, as opposed to almost all animal offerings, there is no mention of *atonement* with regard to the Passover lamb. Atonement requires sacrifice. But the Passover lamb did not atone for anything. A sacrifice implies that something is being surrendered to God; something is being given up—sacrificed. The Passover lamb was roasted and enjoyably eaten by the ones who brought it. Not a sacrifice at all.

And yet, while it was not a *sacrifice*, the Passover lamb is referred to in Scripture as *service* or *worship* of the Lord (Ex. 12:25-26). But what sort of service of the Lord is it if all we do is roast a delicious lamb and enjoy eating it?

But this is precisely the point. The Passover lamb is a celebration of our redemption by the hand of God. But what is the point of redemption? *Why does God save us?* What does He want us to do with our newfound freedom? After the celebration is over and we have marveled at what the Lord has done in our lives, what is supposed to happen next? This exact question is asked in Psalm 116, “What shall I render unto to the Lord for all His benefits toward me?” (Ps. 116:12) The answer is found

in the Psalms that follow the food.

After we have enjoyed our roasted lamb—or our Seder meal—we remind ourselves that “Not unto us, but unto Your name be the glory” (Ps. 115:1a). We respond to the blessings that God has given us by asking, as the Psalmist did, “What shall I render unto the Lord?” (Ps. 116:2).

We commit ourselves to using our freedom and joy to share the glory of God with others. We recognize that our eating and drinking, the material blessings that we have been given, are meant to be used as tools for building His kingdom here on earth. This is the true meaning of Passover. Personal redemption is never personal. After we have thanked the Lord and celebrated; when the meal is over, we use our freedom from bondage as a catalyst to spread God to others—ultimately to *all nations and all peoples* (Ps. 117:1)

And that is truest freedom; the freedom from human bondage; the freedom to serve the Lord. That is what Passover—and a life of faith—is all about. {eoa}

Rabbi Pesach Wolicki serves as Associate Director of the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding & Cooperation in Jerusalem cjcuc.com. He is the author of *Cup of Salvation: A Journey Through King David's Psalms of Praise* and co-Founder of *Blessing Bethlehem*, a program that assists the struggling Christian community of Bethlehem .