

Book One of the Passover Trilogy



# THE LAST SEDER OF JAMES

A Journey Through Passover

Dr. Lon A. Wiksell & Ryan Wiksell

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**Lon A. Wiksell, D. Min. & Ryan Wiksell**

For Fran -LW

For Christina -RW

*May the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob  
keep you and bless you. And may you love  
him with all your heart, soul, and strength.*

# Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	1
THE STORY .....	11
Prologue.....	13
Part I.....	23
Part II.....	45
Part III .....	57
Epilogue .....	67
THE TEACHING .....	71
Commentary on the Story .....	73
Passover.....	93
The Passover Seder .....	97
The Fifteen Steps of the Seder.....	98
The First Cup .....	99
The Second Cup .....	101
The Third Cup .....	107
The Fourth Cup .....	109
The Festivals .....	121
The Seven Levitical Festivals.....	122
Passover (Pesach) and the New Year.....	123
Unleavened Bread (Matzah) .....	124
First Fruits (Yom HaBikkurim).....	125
Feast of Weeks (Shavu'ot / Pentecost).....	126

Feast of Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah / Yom Teruah) .....	126
Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur).....	127
Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot).....	128
Past, Present and Future.....	129
The Pilgrimage Festivals.....	129
Hebrew Terms.....	131
Key Passover Scriptures .....	133
Resources .....	137
About the Authors.....	143

# INTRODUCTION

The Last Seder of James is a unique combination of historical fiction and biblical teaching. The title refers to the story portion, wherein James the brother of Jesus eats a ritual Passover meal (or *Seder*) on the night before he is martyred. The book is subtitled *A Journey Through Passover* because it is designed to impact the reader emotionally, intellectually and spiritually, through a variety of experiences. Below is a quick overview of the sections that follow, and how various readers can make the most of their journey through them.

*Note: This introduction provides basic background information about the premise of the story, the characters, the setting and the festival of Passover. Some readers may choose to skip this section if the information is already familiar to them, or if they simply prefer reading fiction over nonfiction.*

Following the Introduction is the Story, with a Prologue, Parts I – III, and an Epilogue. The Prologue is written in first-person memoir style. The writer identifies herself as Priscilla, known in Scripture as a valued partner to Paul, and co-missionary with her husband Aquila. In the story she is presented as a personal friend and associate of the Apostles John and James as well. Parts I – III subsequently depict, in third-person perspective, John’s night-time visit to James in his prison cell, followed by an astonishing climax at the Temple. The Epilogue then returns to Priscilla’s first-person perspective to close out the narrative.

After the Story section comes the Teaching. This begins with an extended commentary on the story, which provides cross-references

to the scenes referred to in each commentary note. This allows the commentaries to function either as endnotes (to be referenced as needed) or as a nonfiction teaching to be read in its entirety after the story.

Next is a series of lessons about the historical and biblical significance of the Passover tradition, first to Judaism, and then to Christianity. Insight is provided as to the nature and timing of Passover, and the elements of a traditional Seder meal. In the process, the connection is made to the person and ministry of Jesus, who is the Lamb of God, and the ultimate fulfillment of Passover.

All information provided after this is for reference, including an additional teaching about the seven Levitical Festivals, a glossary of Hebrew terms, a selection of relevant Scripture passages, a list of resources for further learning, and author bios. It is the author's hope that the reader enjoys each section in his or her own way.

## **The Story**

Church tradition maintains that James the brother of Jesus was imprisoned during Passover in AD 62. *The Last Seder of James* begins as a novel, featuring an imaginative exploration of this episode in history. The Story supposes that John the Apostle travels from his home in Ephesus to visit James in his cell, and brings a Seder meal with him, so they can celebrate Passover together. As they observe the order of the meal, various elements evoke memories of Jesus' upbringing and ministry. In the process, the two men wrestle with issues in their past, and allow the Holy Spirit to prepare their hearts for things to come.

The narrative presented here is a work of historical fiction. Its purpose is to open the eyes of the reader to the first-century context of



the gospel message, and to enlighten the Church to see these events from the perspective of the time and culture upon which our faith is founded. Although the story is based on Scripture and certain historical records (of varying degrees of reliability) the authors have also exercised artistic liberties for the sake of character and dramatic development. Several aspects of the Passover celebration described here were not practiced during the life of James and John. However, due to limited knowledge of first-century Passover customs, and the aim of this work to educate a modern audience about the traditional Seder meal, certain anachronisms are inevitable.

In short, every effort has been made to honor the facts of history (as they are known) and the spiritual truths found in the Bible, while developing characters and plotlines in an engaging manner.

## **The Characters**

James and John, the major characters in the Story, were widely regarded as two of the three pillars of the early Church.<sup>1</sup> Although they are each highly unique historical figures, unfortunately they bear two of the most commonplace names in the New Testament. Thus, they are subject to some confusion. The following profiles may help to distinguish them from other well-known characters, and provide some background for understanding this story.

### **James**

Commonly identified as the Brother of Jesus, James was a son of Mary and Joseph, and therefore a half-brother to Jesus, and brother to Joseph, Simon, Judas, and their sisters. (Matthew 13:55) He should

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<sup>1</sup> The third was Peter (Galatians 2:9).

not be confused with James the Son of Zebedee (brother of the John in this story), or James the son of Alphaeus, both members of the twelve disciples appointed by Jesus.

James, having grown up with Jesus, would have had a unique perspective on his character and the events of his life. Although he was likely a skeptic during Jesus' earthly ministry (John 5:7) it is clear the Resurrection changed his mind. In fact, James was transformed so completely in this process that he became the head of the Church at Jerusalem, and functioned as the chair of the momentous Jerusalem Council.<sup>2</sup>

For the purpose of this story, James is presumed to have been two years younger than Jesus. Since he was the first son born after Jesus, this seems a reasonable estimate. This would make him approximately sixty-three years old at the time of this story in AD 62.

James authored one book of the New Testament, the epistle commonly known as "James".

## **John**

John son of Zebedee (John the Apostle, John the Beloved, John the Evangelist) was one of the twelve disciples appointed by Jesus. Among these twelve were the sons of Zebedee—John and his older brother James—whom Jesus called "Sons of Thunder". This John should not be confused with John the Baptist (John the Baptizer, John the Immerser) who was Jesus' cousin.

At his crucifixion, Jesus entrusted his mother's care to John, "the disciple whom Jesus loved." (John 19:25-27) John, being the youngest of the disciples, may have been just thirteen years old at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, which was generally accepted as the age for a young

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 12:17, 15:13-29, 21:18-24

man to become a “son of the commandments” and thus be expected to keep them. Thus, at the time of Jesus’ death, John may have been only sixteen, and at the time of James’ death (when this story takes place) in his late forties.

John authored five books of the New Testament: the Gospel of John, the three epistles commonly known as I John, II John and III John, and the book of Revelation. Tradition holds that he died of natural causes at a relatively advanced age, while in exile on the Greek island of Patmos.

## **Other Characters**

Several other characters are named in the Story, some of which are not developed until later in the Trilogy. Nevertheless, a brief introduction may be in order for the characters of Priscilla, Simon, Jude and Ananus.

**Priscilla.** The narrator for the story is known in the Bible as the wife of Aquila of Pontus and an invaluable partner in ministry to the Apostle Paul. Little else is known about her, except that she was a tent-maker by trade, she served the churches at Rome, Corinth and Ephesus (in that order), was regularly named before her husband (indicating a rare prominence among women), and that she helped mentor Apollos, a renowned teacher in the early Church. There is also a theory that she is the anonymous author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Priscilla’s character is explored in much greater detail in the second book of the Trilogy, a fifty-day fictional memoir entitled *I Am Priscilla*.

**Simon.** Jesus’ next oldest brother after James was named Simon (or Simeon). History tells us that he succeeded his brother James as the head of the Church at Jerusalem.

**Jude.** Jesus’ youngest brother was named Jude (or Judah, or

Judas). Very little is known about him, except that he authored the brief but powerful letter that appears at the end of the New Testament, immediately before Revelation.

**Ananus.** The high priest in power during Passover of AD 62 was Ananus ben Ananus (or Ananus II), known to history as the man who imprisoned James. He was deposed immediately afterward, and eventually went on to play a pivotal role in the Jewish revolt four years later.

## **The Setting**

The physical setting for the story is a prison in Jerusalem, where James is being held prior to his execution on a charge of simply “breaking the law”. The story presumes that this prison is located in the basement of the Antonia Fortress, which is adjacent to the north wall of the Temple compound.

The historical setting is Passover in the year AD 62, which is widely regarded as the “beginning of the end” for the Temple. According to some accounts, the high priest at the time, Ananus ben Ananus, was ousted as a result of his treatment of James. Some have even gone so far as to name this as a root cause of the Roman siege of Jerusalem, which took place later in the same decade.

## **The Passover Seder**

A Passover Seder (SAY-der) is a meal that commemorates God’s redemptive work in the Exodus from Egypt. Passover is the first of seven festivals outlined in God’s commandments to Israel found in Leviticus chapter twenty-three.

The story of Passover is found in the book of Exodus, when God

frees his people from slavery in Egypt. As a judgment on the false gods of Egypt, God sends ten plagues, the tenth of which results in the death of every firstborn male. God tells Moses that if the Israelite families each slaughter a lamb and spread the blood on the doorframes of their homes, the Angel of Death would “pass over” them, and they would be safe.

God instituted Passover so that we would always remember God’s grace, mercy, love and redemptive purposes. Passover has been celebrated now for over three thousand years.

Jesus’ last meal on earth, often called “The Last Supper” (recorded in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and referred to by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians) is widely recognized as a Passover Seder. This was the occasion in which Jesus commanded his disciples (including us) that when we eat the bread and drink the cup together, we do so in remembrance of him. Thus, every observance of Communion or Eucharist, within the Christian Church, functions as a Passover Seder in miniature.

## **When is Passover?**

Passover comes each year in the Spring, either in March or April. It can be challenging to keep track of the date of Passover each year, because there is not a consistent relationship between the Gregorian and Hebrew calendars. The table on page 95 provides a list of upcoming dates for Passover.

## **Jesus and Passover**

Many Bible translations refer to the last Passover meal (or Seder)

of Jesus and his disciples as “The Last Supper”.<sup>3</sup> Jesus would have celebrated this Passover meal every year of his life. Along with the six other festivals outlined in Leviticus 23, Passover provided the basic rhythm to his seasons and years. Jesus would have celebrated it first as a child with his family, then later as the head of the household, after his father presumably died. It would have been Jesus’ responsibility as the eldest son to lead and provide for the family.

When Jesus began his ministry he certainly would have spent Passover with his disciples, and his last Passover meal may have been the third or fourth time he celebrated it with them. As their rabbi he would have arranged for each Passover Seder and selected the lamb, to have it sacrificed at the Temple.

Jesus would have identified deeply with the Passover lamb, knowing his life was meant to be surrendered, and his blood was meant to be shed. His blood was to be like the blood painted on the doorposts of each Hebrew dwelling in Egypt, rescuing them from death. And his blood upon us is a sign of our saving relationship with him. He knew that he was the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29) In the past, the law required that countless lambs be sacrificed every year at the Temple, but Jesus has fulfilled this law. He came to be our Passover Lamb forever.

## **The Passover Trilogy**

Of the seven Jewish festivals outlined in Leviticus chapter 23, three of them carried expectations of pilgrimage. As commanded in Deuteronomy 16:16, all Jews who were able to travel to Jerusalem did so for the festivals of Passover, Shavu’ot (Pentecost) and *Sukkot*

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 26:17-30, Mark 14:12-26, Luke 22:1-23

(Tabernacles). These three are referred to as the Pilgrimage Festivals, and form the basis of the trilogy.

*The Last Seder of James*, as the first book, is focused on the first Pilgrimage Festival—Passover. The second book, *A Feast of Weeks*, is about Pentecost, and the Counting of the Omer leading up to it. The third book, entitled *The Fall*, will feature the Feast of Tabernacles, as well as Simchat Torah immediately following.

Although this book is the only one to feature Passover explicitly, the themes of Passover (such as Creation, Exile, Deliverance, Covenant, and Redemption) define the trilogy as a whole. The three-part narrative thus proposes that all the Jewish festivals are built upon the foundation laid by Passover. Thus the collection is known as the Passover Trilogy.

## **Hebrew Terms**

In this edition, Hebrew terminology is kept to a minimum. Wherever Hebrew is important to the Story or the Teaching, footnotes are provided for definitions or other background information. Pronunciation guides and further explanations can be found in the Hebrew Terms section, starting on page 121.

# THE STORY

AD 62

JERUSALEM



## Prologue

*Wednesday Night, the 13<sup>th</sup> of Nisan*<sup>4</sup>

We shuffled patiently amongst the crowd, inching closer to the resplendent city. The dirt was hard as cobblestone beneath our feet from the myriad travelers that had gone before us, just since this morning. Any dust that might have been loose was kicked up hours ago, leaving the road clean and smooth.

The mood was loud and jovial as we approached the great gate of the Essenes, at the southwest corner of Jerusalem, but I could feel it dampened by the party walking in front of us. Ten hooded men with knotted foreheads and pursed lips, shouting in whispers back and forth. Zealots, no doubt.<sup>5</sup> I watched the men anxiously as they grew closer and closer to the Roman checkpoint. And then, they arrived.

“A dagger? Two daggers! Hands on your head!” A Roman soldier barked his orders, and screams erupted on every side. The leader of the group—the man with two daggers—looked frantically to his brothers, but they had all recoiled at the critical moment. Three guards disrobed him and threw him to the ground, then pinned him there with a foot on his neck. The nine other men were summarily stripped to their tunics and beaten, while the leader was kicked and jabbed mercilessly.

As the blood began to flow down the slope toward our feet, the beatings were replaced with elaborate curses in Latin, then more

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<sup>4</sup> The first month of the biblical Hebrew calendar (see page 94)

<sup>5</sup> See “The Zealots” on page 73.

rudimentary curses in Aramaic. The soldiers confiscated over a dozen daggers and a pair of swords, then turned around and brandished them at the necks of the hapless revolutionaries.

Soon the appalling scene grew quiet. The only sound that remained was that of women and children weeping. Then I saw the leader wrestle one hand free, place it on his head and pull it away soaked in blood. His face contorted with rage and he inhaled through gritted teeth.

“Death to Rome!” the Zealot screamed. And in the blink of an eye Rome brought death to the Zealot. Impaled through the heart with his own blade. *He who lives by the sword, dies by the sword.*

Everyone saw it. That was the point.

More soldiers arrived at the gate to drag the offenders away, and we were up next.

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It’s late now, and I’m writing this account by candlelight. I traveled here with John the Elder (some know him as the Apostle, or the Beloved) from Ephesus to visit our brother James in prison. Five days by sea to arrive in Joppa, and a day and a half by donkey to arrive in Jerusalem.

It really was a pleasant journey for the most part. The seas were calm, and the donkeys were generally cooperative. Mostly cooperative. Part of the time. We had some rain yesterday morning, but soon the clouds parted, and the roads were dry again by mid-day. By that point the road was all uphill. We just kept climbing and climbing, and we started to feel a little sorry for our noble steeds. But as we made the final ascent, the sun was settling into the horizon behind us, lighting the city up like a torch. O Jerusalem!

*I rejoiced when they said to me, “Let us go to the House of ADONAI.*

*Our feet are standing in your gates, Jerusalem—Jerusalem, built as a city joined together. There the tribes go up, the tribes of ADONAI.*<sup>6</sup>

For we haven't come to a mountain that can be touched, but to Mount Zion—to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. At the top of the hill, overlooking the city, one can almost see into the future—with thousands upon thousands of angels, a joyous gathering, and the assembly of the firstborn who are written in a scroll in heaven. And dare I say that in its light, beyond its light, in the midst of the city, our eyes are opened to the one true God—the Judge of all!<sup>7</sup>

We didn't climb this hill alone. The ship—and the road—to Jerusalem were packed to the limit. Jews from every corner of the world. Besides myself (Priscilla), there's John and his wife Susanna, Demetrius and his wife Thea, as well as John's student Milos.<sup>8</sup> (I'll have to write more about them at another time.) Sadly, my husband Aquila was unable to come.

We carried no swords, no daggers, and nothing to extort. Our only valuables were an ossuary and a silver cup, and even those were precious only to us. But that didn't make our entry to the city any less nerve-racking. I was shaking violently as I held up my arms for a pat-down. I shudder to think what's become of our city.

Nevertheless, we got through unscathed. Only a moment after we made it past the guards and through the gate, we heard a shout. "Priscilla! John! Susanna!" It was Jude—Jesus' youngest brother—shouting each of our names in turn. Then he belted out a joyous song of praise like he'd seen the Messiah himself on a white horse, not a

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<sup>6</sup> Psalm 122. As a Song of Ascents this was traditionally sung by pilgrims to Jerusalem on their approach to the city.

<sup>7</sup> See Hebrews 12:22-23. It is presumed that Priscilla is quoting this from the oral tradition, or her own teaching, prior to the writing of Hebrews.

<sup>8</sup> While Priscilla, John and Demetrius are based on real biblical characters, Susanna, Thea and Milos are entirely fictional.

half-dozen panicky and bedraggled donkey riders in need of a bath. The crowd stared while we hoofed the last few steps into the House of Zadok,<sup>9</sup> as if we were royalty. (I could hear them murmuring their disappointment when they learned otherwise.)

But the residents of the house were not disappointed at all. Jude couldn't stop hugging and kissing us. And when he did stop, his wife and children arrived to pick up where he left off. My cheeks are sore now from laughing and smiling. Even James' imprisonment couldn't prevent that.

Next Jesus' sisters and their families, and lastly Simon—next brother in line after James—and his family arrived. Simon, as one of the elders at Zadok, offered to serve as our host, and provide us whatever we needed for food and beds.

The time for the evening meal had passed, but Simon fed us anyway. Some members of our group wanted to go and visit James right away, but were told that there was already a crowd of visitors there for the evening. Arrangements are being made for us to see him tomorrow evening instead. A part of me can't wait another moment to see my dear brother. But the other part of me is falling asleep, even as I write. So I will offer this bedtime prayer.

*May ADONAI bless you and keep you. May he make his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you. May he turn his face toward you and grant you shalom.*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The characters enter the Essene Gate, and are welcomed into the (fictional) House of Zadok. These details refer to the theoretical connection between early Christians and members (or former members) of the Essene sect of Judaism. This is explored in greater detail in the second book of the Trilogy.

<sup>10</sup> Numbers 6:24-26

*Thursday Night, the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan*

*Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect work, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

*But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all without hesitation and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, without any doubting—for one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.*<sup>11</sup>

I crossed out “wind” and wrote in “storm”. But then I wondered if that was too strong for what James was trying to say. So I crossed out “storm” and wrote “wind” back in.

It’s late now as I sit in my writing corner at the House of Zadok trying to translate James’ beautiful Hebrew into beautiful Greek.<sup>12</sup> It isn’t easy; Hebrew is such an artful language. Every word has such a range of meaning that’s hard to capture without context. I managed to do it well enough with John’s letter to the churches,<sup>13</sup> but when John writes in Hebrew, you can tell he’s thinking in Greek as well. James, by contrast, knows almost no Greek. He’s never traveled outside of Judea, Samaria and Galilee.

James is one of the dearest people in the world to me. Our lives have taken very different courses, and yet we’ve always understood each other.

I’m often recruited to act as a scribe. My father was a rabbi, and taught me and my sister as if we were sons, so my Hebrew and Greek

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<sup>11</sup> James 1:2-6

<sup>12</sup> See “Translation” on page 73.

<sup>13</sup> Priscilla is referring here (fictitiously) to the First Epistle of John. The story supposes that it’s the only one of his letters to have been written thus far.

are strong. But I would have come whether they needed me or not—for James. The brother of Jesus. And now leader of the community of Believers in Jerusalem. He was jailed a few weeks ago by the Sanhedrin, on what charge? *Breaking the law*. Nothing more was added. James is almost universally beloved—even by unbelievers, who call him James the Just. The outcry was swift and passionate, but the rumors are bad.

Not in their most fantastic visions could the Temple leaders hope for a reputation like that of James. Granted, he was once one of his brother's favorite skeptics, always wary and critical of his ministry. But ever since the day the risen Messiah appeared to him—even before he appeared to the Eleven—James' devotion to Jesus has been total and absolute.

Like his brother, James remained unmarried, living in a musty room in the Lower City, shunning all possessions and maintaining only a single shabby cloak to his name. As a result, his focus on the poor (in body, mind or spirit) of this city has no equal. Thousands upon thousands have been fed, healed, forgiven, freed, or reconciled. Is there even one family in Jerusalem that has been untouched by his compassion? Not one that I can imagine.

They can't keep James in prison forever. Surely the festival crowds will demand his release. Or John will proclaim this the year of the favor of ADONAI, and by his prayers the prison walls will crumble. Or the shackles will fall from James' wrists in the middle of the night. Something. Anything. *Ask in faith, without any doubting...*

The sun had fully set before we could gather round the massive dining table for a meal. It was the loudest meal of my life—and with this group, that's quite a claim. Everyone had a story or three, and they were all about James. We rejoiced over his good works, wept over his trials and laughed uproariously at his antics. (Despite James' piety,

he has a razor-sharp sense of humor, and won't suffer anyone's nonsense.) But then I got a bitter chill, when I realized that we'd begun talking about him in the past tense, not the present. *One who doubts is like a wave of the sea...*

The night was frigid when I stepped outside to think and to pray. Within half an hour John and our whole party came out to tell me the meal was over, and we were going to visit James. Simon and Jude sent us ahead with their blessing—six visitors was plenty.

Even now I struggle to write it: James looks bad. His collarbone is sticking out, his beard is dry and matted, and his skin is caked with dust. I asked Simon what happened to all the food, clothing and soap his friends have sent. He doesn't think any of it is getting past the guards.

James was thrilled to see us, and smiled like a boy on holiday throughout our visit, but every time he spoke he emitted a barking cough. The sound made me want to sit down and weep.

But that wasn't the worst part. I don't think he looked at John even once. He offered him a curt "shalom" and nothing more. John stayed quiet, and seemed to be gazing intently at James the entire time. I won't pretend to be surprised by this. If I am honest, it was exactly as I'd feared. John and James have never been friends.

It puzzles me, and wounds me to the heart, I love them both so much. They would go to the gallows for one another, out of loyalty, but I don't know that they've ever shared a meal, or even a conversation. John the Elder, and James the Just. Two of the three pillars of the church, standing together, yet turning away.

Eventually a guard banged on the gate, demanding that we wrap up our visit, when James produced a roll of papers from underneath his bench, and handed it to me. He told me it was a letter to the twelve tribes of the Diaspora—to the believers all over the world—written in

Hebrew. He asked me to distribute it for him, first to Ephesus, then everywhere else. But first I was to translate it into Greek, and give it that *special touch* I'm apparently so famous for. Then he winked at me—shameless charmer. But I didn't argue. I was honored.

On the walk home, John led the way by himself, his shoulders drooping. I quickened my pace to catch up. I told him how obvious it was that he and James needed some time alone. He nodded politely. I suggested, on behalf of the group, that we all stay home while he visits James by himself tomorrow night. I kept talking to drown out his protests. Susanna, Thea and I would spend the day tomorrow gathering some food and drink for him to smuggle in his cloak. It would have to be at night, because the daytime guards are too strict. But even the night watchmen would need money to turn a blind eye. So we'll make sure John has enough. And also a proper disguise to make sure he could go unrecognized. And dinner ready at home for when he returned. Everything I could think of to say.

Eventually, John stopped walking. He looked up at the night sky, resplendent with stars.

"Are you meddling again, Priscilla?"

"Maybe."

"Hm." John nodded thoughtfully. I felt my cheeks burning.

"I just can't take another day of it, John. That silent grudge. It makes me want to jump out of my skin."

"It's late," he said cryptically. He turned his eyes back to the stars, then looked at me again. Though I got the feeling he was looking at my chin instead of my eyes. "I just have one condition, dear Lady."

"Anything."

"What you say is true. I need to do go alone. You cannot come with me, so there will be no one to record our time together. But I will remember what we say and repeat it all for you when I return."



“Yes, of course, John.”

“And I will need everything you can gather for me, thank you. I need to go prepared.” He narrowed his eyes and smiled knowingly. “It is the first night of Passover, is it not?”

# THE TEACHING

## Passover

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Passover is the first of seven festivals outlined by ADONAI according in Leviticus 23:4-8. According to verse four, “These are the appointed feasts of ADONAI, the holy convocations which you are to proclaim at their appointed season.” There are several critically important points in this verse. First, these are God-appointed seasons—sacred seasons for the community to come together to observe and celebrate. Second, ADONAI calls us together with him in this observance by telling us that we are to proclaim these days.

The book of Exodus is the story of God redeeming his people from Egypt. As a judgment on the false gods of Egypt, ADONAI sent ten plagues. The tenth and last plague was the death of every firstborn male. ADONAI told Moses that the Israelites were to slaughter a lamb and spread the blood on the doorframes of their homes. (Exodus 12:7) ADONAI’s instructions continue in verse twelve:

“For I will go through the land of Egypt on that night and strike down every firstborn, both men and animals, and I will execute judgments against all the gods of Egypt. I am ADONAI. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are. So there will be no plague among you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. This day is to be a memorial for you. You are to keep it as a feast to ADONAI. Throughout your generations you are to keep it as an eternal ordinance.”

It is good to remember that verse eleven states, “It is ADONAI’s Passover.” This was not a festival created by man, but one that was

instituted by ADONAI. It is God's! God created it that we should always remember God's grace, mercy, love and redemptive purposes. Passover has been celebrated now for over three thousand years, and was observed by Yeshua every year of his life—first with his family, and later with his disciples. Passover was the occasion in which he took the cup and the *matzot*, and commanded his disciples (including us) to do this in remembrance of him. (Luke 22:7-20)

It is also worth noting that Yeshua said in Luke 22:18, “I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” So there will be a day when we celebrate this meal with him!

## **When is Passover?**

In instituting the Passover in Egypt, ADONAI told Moses and Aaron, “This month will mark the beginning of months for you; it is to be the first month of the year for you.” (Exodus 12:2) According to Leviticus 23:6, “ADONAI's Passover begins at twilight on the fourteenth day of the first month.” This naturally raises the question: what is the first month of the year?

The modern Hebrew calendar celebrates the civil New Year starting in the fall with the festival of *Rosh Hashanah* (the Feast of Trumpets). For example, the Jewish civil year of 5779 begins on the evening of September 9, 2018. The biblical Hebrew calendar, however, begins with the month of *Nisan* in the spring, according to ADONAI's instruction to Moses and Aaron.

It can be challenging to keep track of the date of Passover each year, because of the difference between the modern Gregorian calendar and the Hebrew one. The Gregorian calendar is strictly solar, with months that do not follow the phases of the moon. However the Hebrew calendar is both lunar and solar. It is lunar, in that each new

month begins with a new moon. It is solar, in that a leap month is added every few years to keep months in their correct seasons. This means that there is not a consistent relationship between the Gregorian and Hebrew calendars. The following table demonstrates this issue in the dates of Passover for the years 2020 to 2025. (The Jewish day begins and ends at sunset.)

Year	First evening of Passover	Jewish Year
2020	Wednesday, April 8	5780
2021	Saturday, March 27	5781
2022	Friday, April 15	5782 <i>(Leap month added)</i>
2023	Wednesday, April 5	5783
2024	Monday, April 22	5784 <i>(Leap month added)</i>
2025	Saturday, April 12	5785

To follow the dating of Passover it is helpful to have a Jewish calendar. These can be found on the internet, or a printed version may be obtained from the website [www.messianicjewish.net](http://www.messianicjewish.net)

## Are Gentile Christians required to observe the feasts?

The feast days were given as part of God’s covenant with Israel, a covenant that still exists today. (Romans chapters 10 and 11) For the sake of Jewish identity, expression, family and community, Jews will find it wise to observe them. However, according to Acts chapter fifteen and the Council of Jerusalem, Gentiles are not obligated to do so. Still, a case may be made that since Gentiles are grafted into the Olive Tree (Romans 11:11-24) they are called to share in the blessings ADONAI has given to Israel.

A second case for Gentiles observing the seven festivals of

Leviticus 23 is that these festivals are all about Jesus. They tell of his coming, his ministry and his future work yet to be fulfilled. Since these appointed times reveal God's plan of redemption, they provide a great benefit and foundation to the Christian faith for those who understand and experience them.

## The Passover Seder

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Seder means “order”, so the Passover Seder is a ceremonial Passover meal which follows a specific order. The Passover Seder, which begins on the fifteenth day of the first month, consists of fifteen steps. The number fifteen reminds us of the fifteen Songs of Ascent, and of the Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*) that occurs on the fifteenth day of the seventh month.

Fifteen also reminds us of the fifteen steps leading up to the Temple in Jerusalem from the south. Lastly, there are fifteen Hebrew words in the priestly blessing. (Numbers 6:22-27)

Thus, the number fifteen holds tremendous symbolism, reminding us of the meaning of Passover as we walk the pilgrim journey through the Seder.

The fifteen traditional steps vary from culture to culture. However, there is a common thread as participants are guided by the drinking of the four cups of wine, which come from the four “I will”s of Exodus 6:6.

The following Seder order is my own (Lon’s) Messianic version. The fifteen steps are grouped by their respective places within the larger context of the Four Cups.

## **The Fifteen Steps of the Seder**

### **The First Cup – “I Will Bring You Out”**

1. Drinking the Cup of Sanctification (*Kadesh*)
2. Washing the Hands (*Urchatz*)
3. Dipping the Green Vegetable (*Karpas*)
4. Breaking the *Matzah*/Afikoman (*Yachatz*)

### **The Second Cup – “I Will Free You”**

5. Telling the Story (*Maggid*)
  - a. The Ten Plagues
  - b. The Four Questions & Answers
  - c. The Passover Lamb
  - d. Singing “It Would Have Been Enough” (*Dayenu*)
  - e. Drinking the Cup of Deliverance
6. Washing the Hands (*Rachtzah*)
7. Eating the *Matzah* (*Motzi*)
8. Eating the Bitter Herb (*Maror*)
9. Eating the Charoset and the Hillel Sandwich (*Korekh*)
10. Eating the Meal (*Shulchan Orekh*)
11. Tasting the Afikoman (*Tzafun*)

### **The Third Cup – “I Will Redeem You”**

12. Drinking the Cup of Redemption (*Barekh*)
13. Singing the Songs of Praise (*Hallel*)

### **The Fourth Cup – “I Will Take You”**

14. Drinking the Cup of Joy (*Nirtzah*)
15. Proclaiming “Next Year in Jerusalem” (*L'Shanah Haba'ah*)



## **The First Cup <sup>85</sup>**

### **1. Drinking the Cup of Sanctification (Story, p. 27)**

The first cup of wine James and John drink is known as the Cup of Sanctification. It corresponds to the first “I will” in Exodus 6:6, “I will bring you out.” In the Exodus story this refers to God separating his people from the Egyptians. Today we call this the Cup of Sanctification, because sanctification is the process of being set apart, or separated, from evil. As it was with the Israelites, this is our first step to true freedom.

### **2. Washing of the Hands (Story, p. 27)**

Although many commandments in the Torah do indeed concern health and personal hygiene, the practice of hand-washing before meals is purely symbolic. Thus, it may be done by every participant, or only by the leader. Jesus clashed with the Pharisees on this issue in Mark 7:3, because they expected it to occur before every meal. Jesus no doubt observed the ritual during the Seder, but did not adhere to the Pharisees’ burdensome daily mandate. (This is important, in case anyone is concerned that Jesus ate his food with dirty hands.)

### **3. Dipping the Green Vegetable (*Karpas*) (Story, p. 28)**

In this ritual, a vegetable like parsley is dipped into saltwater. Some maintain that the greenness of the vegetable represents the flourishing of the people of Israel prior to the famine which brought them to Egypt, and the saltwater represents the tears of slavery that came as a result. As we eat, we are to enter in fully to this suffering

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<sup>85</sup> For more about the First Cup, and the first “I will” statement from Exodus, see page 114.

and sadness, as if it were our own.

The reader may also be reminded of Jesus' self-identification with the symbol of the "green tree" in Ezekiel 20:47. (Luke 23:31) This is one of several messianic claims where Jesus compares himself to a flourishing plant, such as a tree or vine, to symbolize the new life he comes to bring to the world.

#### **4. Breaking the *Matzah*/Afikoman (Story, p. 26-30)**

*Matzah* is the Hebrew word for "unleavened bread". *Matzah* serves as a central element to the Passover Seder, as it was specifically commanded by God in the celebration of the festival, both in the Exodus story and in Leviticus. In the Exodus story, the Israelites are commanded to eat their bread without yeast, to help speed their departure from Egypt. Thus, one of the primary features of Passover is to eat bread for eight days with no yeast. (Exodus chapter 12)

Jesus, at the Last Supper, equates the Passover *matzah* to his own body, about to be broken. This is a highly appropriate analogy, since yeast, or leaven, which represents sin elsewhere in Scripture, is absent from the bread, and sin is absent from Jesus. It's also fascinating to note that a typical sheet of *matzah* is both "pierced" and "striped", evoking the prophecy in Isaiah 53:5, that the messiah would be "pierced because of our transgressions", and that "by his stripes we are healed."

Another way Jesus is symbolized in the *matzah* is in the ritual of the Afikoman. (See "11. Tasting the Afikoman" on page 106.)

## The Second Cup <sup>86</sup>

### 5. Telling the Story (Story, p. 37)

At its core, Passover is a story. Not only that, it is one of the foundational narratives that helps define the great themes of Scripture. This is the part of the Seder where participants take turns reading portions of the story aloud, so we never forget the great works of God in the past, for the sake of the present and the future.

#### 5a. The Ten Plagues (Story, p. 37)

Exodus chapters seven through twelve recount the ten plagues to which God subjected the Egyptians. In each case, the land of Goshen (where the Israelites live) is exempted from the misery. The only exception is the tenth plague, which does not exempt them geographically or ethnically, but on the basis of their obedience to God's instructions.

1. **Blood**—The Nile River turns to blood
2. **Frogs**—The land is overwhelmed by frogs
3. **Bugs**—The land swarms with insects
4. **Wild Animals**—Beasts of all kinds ravage the land
5. **Pestilence**—Disease wipes out domestic animals
6. **Boils**—Every man and beast is infected with painful boils
7. **Hail**—Hail kills every plant and unsheltered creature
8. **Locusts**—Locusts devour everything left by the hail
9. **Darkness**—The sun, moon and all kindled lights are dark
10. **Death of the Firstborn**—Moses warns that the Angel of Death will take the firstborn male of every family, except in those homes where God's instructions—to slaughter a lamb and paint its blood on their doorframes—are followed.

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<sup>86</sup> For more about the Second Cup, and the second "I will" statement, see page 115.

## 5b. The Four Questions & Answers (Story, p. 38)

One of the key moments in the Seder is called the Four Questions, where the reasoning behind various aspects of the meal is explained to the participants. The over-arching “theme question” is: Why is this night different from all other nights? The four questions below are intended explore this theme question in detail.

1. On all other nights we eat leavened products and *matzah*, why on this night do we eat only *matzah*?
2. On all other nights we eat all vegetables, why on this night do we eat only bitter herbs?
3. On all other nights, we don’t dip our food even once, why on this night do we dip twice?
4. On all other nights we eat sitting or reclining, why on this night do we only recline?

The questions are answered with variations on the assertion that *we ourselves* were slaves. By celebrating in this way, we enter in fully to the plight, the bitterness and ultimate joy of our ancestors. Believers in Jesus experience an additional degree of specialness on this night, because it’s the night he commanded us to eat and drink in remembrance of him.

## 5c. The Passover Lamb (Story, p. 37)

When the Angel of Death passed through Egypt, its mission was to see that one death was dealt on every household. Although this is harsh, it was the final straw of justice for a kingdom that had repeatedly mocked and rejected the One True God. We sometimes refer to him as a “God of second chances”, but this was Egypt’s *tenth chance*.

This occasion also created a test of faith for the Israelites. Each family now had the opportunity to “show” the angel that death had already been achieved for that household, and no further judgment

was necessary. Thus, the family with the blood of a lamb on its doorposts would be “passed over”.

A lamb was required, but it couldn’t be just any lamb. It had to be a male, one year old or less, without defect. The chosen creature could not be old, or lame, or sick, and thus close to death. It had to be a true sacrifice—a real loss. To intensify that loss, the lamb had to live with the family for four days, allowing them to bond with it like a pet.

That makes two important criteria for the lamb: (1) It had to be perfect, and (2) it had to be loved. Both of these features make it a valuable animal. In other words, this act had to mean something. If it hadn’t, no faith would be required at all.

#### **5d. “It Would Have Been Enough” (Dayenu) (Story, p. 38)**

*Dayenu* is one of the liveliest songs traditionally sung during a Passover Seder. The Hebrew word means “It would have been enough” and reminds participants to be thankful for every work of God in their lives, instead of anxiously awaiting the next one. God expresses this same principle to the Apostle Paul, when God tells him “My grace is sufficient for you.” (2 Corinthians 12:9)

John utters the word *Dayenu* at the end of Part I as an expression of this kind of faith. Although he would prefer James to live, and could imagine many potential blessings as a result, he thanks God for the fullness of his life up to that point, no matter what happens.

When sung in full, the song contains fifteen verses (a very significant number – see page 97) which follow the same format:

*Had God brought us out of Egypt  
But not executed judgment on the Egyptians  
It would have been enough (Dayenu)!*

The fifteen verses list the works of God in three groups of five, as

follows:

### **Five Stanzas of Liberation**

1. God brought us out of Egypt
2. God executed judgment on the Egyptians
3. God executed judgment on their gods
4. God slayed their firstborn
5. God gave us their wealth

### **Five Stanzas of Miracles**

6. God split the sea for us
7. God led us through on dry land
8. God drowned our oppressors
9. God provided for our needs for 40 years in the wilderness
10. God fed us manna

### **Five Stanzas of Being with God**

11. God gave us the Sabbath
12. God led us to Mount Sinai
13. God gave us the Torah
14. God brought us to the Land of Israel
15. God built the Temple for us

Messianic versions of the song may add new verses that refer to the fulfillment of these events, such as the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah, the sending of the *Ruakh HaKodesh* (Holy Spirit), and the establishment of the New Covenant.

### **5e. The Cup of Deliverance (Story, p. 39)**

Also known as the Cup of Judgment (against the Egyptians), the drinking of this cup commemorates the Israelites' moment of freedom from slavery. It serves as a climax to the Story of Deliverance,

which takes the participant from the infancy of Moses to the parting of the Red Sea. In the *Dayenu*, the story is extended even further into the future.

The theme of all the activities leading up to the Cup of Deliverance is the participants' willing embrace of the experience of slavery. Thus, when the story recounts their deliverance, we can fully identify with that freedom, especially through the work of Jesus in our hearts.

#### **6. Washing the Hands (Story, p. 46)**

For a second time, participants wash their hands, or the leader may wash his or her hands on behalf of everyone present.

#### **7. Eating the *Matzah* (Story, p. 46)**

Before introducing the *maror* and the *charoet*, another piece of *matzah* is eaten. In some modern Seders, a participant will take a sheet of *matzah*, and break it into five pieces. The first is eaten plain, the second is eaten with the *maror* spread on top, the third with the *charoet*, and the fourth and fifth are used to assemble the Hillel sandwich (see commentary note below.)

#### **8. Eating the Bitter Herb (*Maror*) (Story, p. 47)**

*Maror* is the "bitter herb", usually horseradish, which evokes the bitterness of slavery in Egypt. To take too much, as James does, causes the eyes to water and really clears the sinuses.

#### **9. Eating the Charoet and the Hillel Sandwich (Story, p. 48)**

*Charoet* is a sweet concoction often comprised of chopped apples, nuts, red wine, cinnamon and honey. Its texture and color is said to represent the mortar which Jewish slaves used to make bricks

in Egypt. In the meal, it serves to chase away the bitterness of the *maror*, which is consumed immediately prior.

One striking feature of *charoset* is its role in making the famous Hillel sandwich. A Hillel sandwich is composed of two pieces of *matzah*, with *maror* and *charoset* in between. The effect is startling and delicious, as the sweet mixes with the bitter. Although this sandwich is not featured in the Story, it is referenced indirectly by John's need to transport the *maror* and *charoset* in the same jar, and James' joke that the two might actually taste good together.

It is doubtful that *charoset* was part of the Seder meal during the time of James and John.

## **10. Eating the Meal (Story, p. 48)**

Finally, two-thirds of the way through the ritual, dinner is served. Although this is the most casual portion of the Seder, it is also rich with symbolism. The original entrée of the meal was the lamb, which carried multiple layers of meaning for the Israelites escaping Egypt. The fact that God focused his commandments so carefully on the communal eating of this meal should remind us of the importance of eating together as a community. This carries forward into the way we, as believers today, receive Communion, or the Eucharist, together as one body.

Traditional food served for the Passover meal includes *matzah* ball soup, gefilte fish, chopped liver, and macaroons for dessert. Although there is no prescriptive menu for the occasion, the foods must be chosen carefully, since the eight-day festival of Passover prohibits the consumption of yeast. (*Matzah* pizza, anyone?)

## **11. Tasting the Afikoman (Story, p. 48)**

The ceremonial *Afikoman* may or may not have been instituted



by the time of James and John. But it is a wonderful symbol of the redemptive themes inherent in the Passover Seder. Three sheets of *matzah* are placed together on a plate, then the middle one is pulled out and broken in half. The larger half, now called the *Afikoman*, is wrapped in a cloth and hidden away.

After the meal, the children look all over the house to find it. The one who succeeds is then rewarded, usually with money. Finally, the recovered *matzah* is enjoyed as if it were a dessert, apropos to the word *Afikoman*, which translates “that which comes after.”

The *Afikoman* is a clear symbol of the Trinity, and Jesus’ redemptive role therein. As the second (or “middle”) member of the Trinity, God the Son was willingly removed from his place of divine glory, broken on the cross, and hidden from sight (buried in a tomb.) But he was not hidden forever, because in his resurrection he is revealed again, and all who now find him are rewarded, in this case with eternal life.

This symbolism was initiated by Jesus when he picked up the *Afikoman*, immediately before the Cup of Redemption, and equated it to his own body, broken and given for us. (See “From the Gospels” on page 135.)

## **The Third Cup <sup>87</sup>**

### **12. Drinking the Cup of Redemption (Story, p. 53)**

Between the Cup of Deliverance and the Cup of Redemption, James and John find the reconciliation they both need so desperately. James is delivered from spiritual bondage by his confession of

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<sup>87</sup> For more about the Third Cup, and the third “I will” statement from Exodus, see page 116.

bitterness, and redeemed by the blood of Jesus, represented in the Third Cup.

Thinking back to the Exodus, we know that the Israelites were fully delivered by the time the tenth plague was complete. But they were not yet redeemed. They were still in the land of captivity. If they had stayed long enough, they may well have found themselves enslaved again. The Third Cup represents the passage through the Red Sea, and the birth of a nation fully separated from its oppressor.

We are not so different today. We can live lives of confession (the baptism of John – Acts 18:25) which may break the bonds of sin for a time. Or we can be fully redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, pass through the waters (the baptism of Jesus – Matthew 28:19) and leave our lives of sin behind us once and for all.

This is the meaning of the Third Cup—the Cup of Redemption. When Jesus came to this moment in the Last Supper, after having equated the *Afikoman* to his broken body, he said “This is my blood, poured out for you.” He was fulfilling the promise, once and for all, to redeem us out of our selfish lives and into his abundant life. And if the Son sets us free, we will be free indeed. (John 8:36)

### **13. Singing the Songs of Praise (*Hallel*) (Story, p. 54)**

After the Cup of Redemption, James and John sing songs found in Psalms 113 to 118. These psalms were ritually chanted in the Temple while the Passover lambs were being slain. Many well-known expressions of spirit and truth are found in these songs:

**113:3** “From the rising of the sun to its going down the Name of ADONAI is to be praised.”

**115:1** “Not to us, ADONAI, not to us, but to Your Name be the glory— because of Your love and Your faithfulness.”

**116:1-2** “I love ADONAI, for He hears my voice, my cries. Because He has turned His ear to me, I will call on Him all my days.

**116:13-14** “I will lift up the cup of salvation, and call on the Name of ADONAI. I will fulfill my vows to ADONAI in the presence of all His people.”

**118:1** “Praise ADONAI, for He is good, for His lovingkindness endures forever.”

**118:14-16** “ADONAI is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation. Shouts of joy and victory are in the tents of the righteous: “ADONAI’s right hand is mighty! ADONAI’s right hand is lifted high! ADONAI’s right hand is mighty!”

**118:21-26 (excerpts)** “You have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone. This is the day that ADONAI has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it! Hosanna! Please, ADONAI, save now! Blessed is He who comes in the Name of ADONAI. We bless you from the House of ADONAI.”<sup>88</sup>

## **The Fourth Cup<sup>89</sup>**

### **14. Drinking the Cup of Joy (Story, p. 54)**

Some believers, when celebrating Passover, choose not to drink

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<sup>88</sup> This passage in the Hallel is quoted by the followers of Jesus welcoming him to Jerusalem before his crucifixion (The “triumphal entry” on Palm Sunday.) The term “House of Adonai” refers to the Temple in Jerusalem.

<sup>89</sup> For more about the Fourth Cup, and the fourth “I will” statement from Exodus, see page 117.

the fourth of the Four Cups. In Matthew 26:29, Jesus says, “I will never drink of this fruit of the vine from now on, until that day when I drink it anew with you in My Father’s kingdom.” This is the moment where his disciples were expecting to drink the Fourth Cup—the Cup of Joy—but Jesus demurred.

He had just equated the wine in the Third Cup to his own blood, which he would spill the very next day to redeem us all. By stopping there, he effectively paused the Seder for thousands of years, allowing us to live out the fullness of that Third Cup, called the Cup of Redemption. Thus, one could say we’re living in the “Age of the Third Cup”. But when the Kingdom has fully come, it will be time for all followers of Jesus to drink the Fourth Cup together. This is what Revelation 19:7 calls the Wedding Supper of the Lamb, and the body of believers is his shining bride.

## **15. Proclaiming “Next Year in Jerusalem”**

At the very heart of Passover is the hope of the Promised Land. God did not set us free simply to scatter to the winds, but to gather us in a place of worship and blessing.

Unfortunately, God’s people scattered anyway. Some were conquered and dragged away, others left of their own volition. And now we are spread all across the world. But there is a unifying hope, as everyone who assembles on the eve of Passover cries together with one voice, “Next year in Jerusalem!”

Although we have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb of God, we are still in exile. But one day, we will drink the Fourth Cup once and for all with Jesus, at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. It may be far in the future, or it may be near. But we are called to live every day in the spirit of Revelation 22:20, proclaiming “Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!”

In the story, the seder is interrupted before the Fourth Cup, which means that James and John are unable to share that proclamation together. John had celebrated the Seder every year of his life, and had always finished it, until now. The ending must have hung in the air like an unresolved melody.

Perhaps the phrase “*L’shanah haba’ah b’Yerushalayim*”—“Next year in Jerusalem”—echoes in John’s mind as he chases after James, and observes his final testament. And perhaps these are the words John writes in the sand, to bring closure in his own mind to the last Seder of James.

## Passover Seder Traditions

There are some biblical commands regarding the celebration of Passover, and there are many traditions based purely on culture. Presented here are some of the most prominent traditions, and a general idea of how they have been observed in different eras and cultures. First, a quick explanation of the five “eras”, represented in this table as five columns, with corresponding icons.



### **First Passover in Egypt** (Approx. 1300 BC)

These are one-time practices, which did not all carry forward into the annual traditions of Passover.



### **Temple-Based Judaism** (Before AD 70)

This is “biblical” Judaism (through the time of Jesus) based around the Tabernacle and 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Temples.



### **Post-Temple Judaism** (AD 70 – Present)

This is “rabbinic” Judaism, based on the Torah and Talmud, after the destruction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple.



### **Messianic Jews & Gentiles** (1967 – Present)

Followers of Jesus who identify with Jewish heritage and practice. Focus here is on the modern movement.



### **Gentile Christian Church** (Approx. AD 30 – Present)

Those who do not celebrate Passover, but observe the cup and the bread as a sacrament instituted by Jesus.

# Passover Traditions From Age to Age

Historical		Modern		
First Passover in Egypt	Temple- Based Judaism	Post- Temple Judaism	Messianic Jews & Gentiles	Gentile Christian Church
(-1300 BC)	(Before AD 70)	(AD 70 - Present)	(1967 - Present)	(-AD 30 - Present)

