

Setting the Scene

It's a bit of a leap, I know, but imagine you've been transported back in time – 2000 years, no less – and you're sitting in a hired upper room in Jerusalem – a family room. You have joined a Jewish nomadic preacher and his Jewish friends, his followers, his disciples, who have taken this room in order to celebrate the high Jewish feast of Passover. Naturally – that's why they're here – their Jewish minds are full of what happened at the original Passover, well over a thousand years before.

The upper-room event is recorded in Matthew 26:17-29; Mark 14:12-25; Luke 22:7-23; John 13 – 17.¹ As you can see, all four Gospel writers recorded the episode, and that, in itself, surely marks the lasting impression it must have made upon those who were there.

To get the full force of what follows, it is necessary for you to try to get a sense of the emotion pulsating through the group. The preacher's disciples had been wondering about where they would eat the Passover so that they could prepare for the feast, and pestering him about it (Matt. 26:17; Mark 14:12). Indeed, all the Jews would have been taking all necessary steps so that nothing should spoil the annual celebration (John 18:28).²

¹ I include the preacher's prayer because it contains vital development of his teaching in the upper room.

² Passover was a red-letter day in the Jewish calendar (Matt. 26:1-2,17-19; Mark 14:1,12-16; Luke 2:41; 22:1,7-15; John 2:13,23; 6:4; 11:55-56; 12:1; 13:1; 18:28,39; 19:14,31). The nearest I can get to it – though the comparison is not one I like to make – is the feverish preparations in the West (at least) for the annual near-Dionysian feast known as Christmas. For weeks – many months in the commercial world – people frantically anticipate the coming festivities, where and how they will spend the days, gifts they need to buy and give to people, card lists they need to get up-to-date, trimmings to put up, lights to get working, and a tree to dominate

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To get into the emotions of the men in that group assembling in that upper room, you need to go back another 1500 years – to the original Passover.

Let me set out some of the salient points of the first observance of the Passover in Egypt, that hasty supper eaten by the Jews who had been, and still were, miserable slaves in Egypt, undergoing indescribable sufferings inflicted on them by cruel taskmasters. The account may be read in Exodus 12. It is midnight. At that most unlikely hour, by God's command through Moses, the Jews were huddled in their hovels, dressed in outdoor clothes, staff in hand, sandals on feet, ready for a long trek out into the unknown, wild, howling desert. They were obviously excited, no doubt anxious. Great things were afoot! There they were, hastily eating their last meal in Egypt – a specified meal of roast lamb and unleavened bread. Each family was desperately sheltering under the blood they had painstakingly smeared on the doorposts and lintel of their house, relying on God's promise through Moses, trusting that when God's angel of death passed over Egypt that night, all those sheltering under the blood would be safe. But only those! Inevitable death – the death of the firstborn – would visit every unprotected house. During recent days, God, through Moses and Aaron, had inflicted a series of shattering plagues on the Egyptians, and now, this Passover night, God was about to unleash his culminating, devastating plague in order to set his people free. That plague – the death of the firstborn – would prove overwhelming for Egypt, but gloriously liberating for the Jews. In this way the exodus began.

Moreover, so significant were those events that God had laid a perpetual obligation of remembrance and commemoration on all succeeding generations of Israelites:

the sitting room, and, above, think about the food, and, in most cases, the alcohol, they will consume, and such like.

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This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast (Ex. 12:14).

With the passing of the midnight hour on the fourteenth day of the month, all those years before, the plagues would be over, but the exodus had only begun: the hasty meal was over, but it would lead to a series of miraculous events whereby those wretched slaves would be forever set free from Egypt, entirely transformed from a cowering, frightened, nomadic family into a nation especially privileged and distinct. The memory of those events would be permanently burned into the Jewish psyche.

During the crowded few weeks which followed hard upon that last meal in Egypt, and the terrifying visitation of death upon every Egyptian household, the desperate and despairing Jews experienced the most remarkable – breathtaking – deliverance from Egyptian slavery, accompanied by an incredible transformation in their condition. After the death of the firstborn of Egypt, God, through Moses, dramatically intervened for the released-slaves, leading them by a fiery, cloudy pillar, out into the desert, making a way across the Red Sea. In those waters (which parted for the Israelites), God smashed to destruction the seemingly-invincible power of Egypt by drowning the cream of Pharaoh's army in the returning deluge. He further sustained the escaped-slaves as they trudged across the desert, by miraculously providing for them manna, quails and water. And so on.

In this way, God set his people free of Egypt, set the children of Abraham free from slavery (Ps. 106:20-45), formed them into a nation, and, within a few weeks, at Sinai, crowned it all by giving them, and only them – as his own special people (Deut. 4:6-45; 5:26; 7:6-11; Ps. 147:19-20; Acts 2:23; Rom. 3:2; 9:4; 1 Cor. 9:20-21) – his covenant and law. Eventually, he would settle these long-time slaves as a privileged nation in the land of promise as his own covenant people (Amos 3:2).

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And all this happened in accordance with God's promise to Abram, issued long before, even before Abram had any descendants:

Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions (Gen. 15:13-14).

Again:

Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God (Gen. 17:4-8).

As Moses triumphantly declared in his record of those events:

The time that the people of Israel lived in Egypt was 430 years. At the end of 430 years, on that very day, all the hosts of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt. It was a night of watching by the LORD, to bring them out of the land of Egypt; so this same night is a night of watching kept to the LORD by all the people of Israel throughout their generations (Ex. 12:40-42).

In short, as God told the people through Moses:

Behold, I am making a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been created in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the LORD, for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you (Ex. 34:10).

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That is why these Jewish men are in this upper room – to remember and rejoice over those stupendous events which had occurred to their ancestors 1500 years before.

And you – in your imagination – are now sitting among them, trying to absorb all that you are hearing and seeing. For the preacher is speaking. His followers do not realise that what they are about to hear will change their lives forever. They are about to hear nothing less than what might be described as the announcement of another exodus – a new exodus, a greater exodus than that of Israel from Egypt, an exodus which will knock the original deliverance into a cocked hat. Why! It will be even greater than Judah's return from captivity, and that figured more highly than the original exodus. As God had told the Jews just before they were overwhelmed by the Babylonians, and hauled off into grievous captivity:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when it shall no longer be said: 'As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt', but: 'As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them'. For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their fathers (Jer. 16:14-15; 23:7-8).

And, as the old exodus meant that an ancient people would be formed and given the old covenant, so the new exodus would be for a new people given a new covenant.

Never again will those Jewish men be taken up with Israel's deliverance from Egypt under Moses, nor the return from Babylon; the memory of all that will fade; something much bigger, something of far-wider significance, is being set in motion in their very presence. The pendulum has begun to swing, the clock is remorselessly ticking away the final hours before the preacher will accomplish a glorious redemption for all his people, a deliverance from a slavery far worse than that of the Jews in Egypt, and it will take place in the city of Jerusalem hard by, on a hill and in a burial ground just outside the city walls.

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All this, of course, is hidden from the preacher's followers at the time. Though he has told them several times what they should expect, the fact is they are clueless as to what is coming, what's about to hit them and change them – and the world – for ever.

So what happened in that upper room with that Jewish preacher and his handful of followers? What was so epoch-making? What marked it as the watershed of the ages?