

5. Jesus' crucifixion is arguably the most well known aspect of His life. A person may know little about Him, but almost certainly anyone who's heard of Jesus knows about His death on a Roman cross. Even those who don't believe that He actually was crucified are aware of this claim regarding Him. But such skeptics are relatively rare; virtually all historians and serious scholars concede that a Jew named Jesus of Nazareth was crucified as the gospels record. Acknowledgement of Jesus' crucifixion is almost universal, but that's where consensus ends; there is wide disagreement respecting its purpose, outcome and meaning. This is true even among those professing Christians who agree that Jesus' death was atoning and believe that He was raised from the dead. To make the case one need only consider the numerous atonement theories and variations within those theories.

Views and beliefs concerning Jesus' crucifixion are plentiful and varied, but one thing that most have in common is that they reflect little or no consideration of the Old Testament Scriptures. One might argue that the matter of atonement itself disproves this claim since at least some atonement theories draw heavily on the Old Testament sacrificial system and especially the sin offering. But this sacrificial framing of Jesus' cross is very narrow and fails to take into account the larger Old Testament context and its overarching themes. Indeed, one can't rightly discern the sacrificial dimension of Jesus' death without situating it within the Israelite salvation history at the heart of the Old Testament. Narrowly interpreting Jesus' death in terms of the Levitical sacrificial system might yield a doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement, but it will be one that lacks the context and frame of reference to make it biblical in the true sense.

Jesus' death must be interpreted in terms of the fabric of the Old Testament if it is to be rightly understood. The most obvious proof is Jesus' own assertion that He'd come into the world to fulfill His Father's purposes for the world – the purposes revealed and explicated in the Hebrew Scriptures. Whatever Jesus' cross signified and accomplished, that signification and accomplishment were a matter of fulfillment. Few would disagree with this in principle, but, as indicated above, it's typically applied in the narrow sense of connecting Jesus' death with Israel's sacrificial system as God's vehicle for dealing with sin and transgression. This connection is not without scriptural basis, but the gospel accounts themselves provide a different starting point, namely the *Passover*.

Jesus chose Passover as the context for His death, but not arbitrarily. He did so precisely because He understood His messianic mission and the way the Scriptures connect it with Israel's Passover – not only the historical Egyptian Passover/Exodus episode, but Passover as a prophetic motif. Jesus understood from the Scriptures that the Egyptian Passover (in all of its dimensions and significations) served a prophetic purpose. Thus the annual Passover observance looked forward as well as backward: *The God who'd delivered Abraham's exiled descendents from their bondage, gathered them to Himself and made them a kingdom of priests for the sake of the world was going to arise and do the same thing again.* The Exodus from Egypt, then, was a prototype; it presaged and promised a second such deliverance. And like the first one, this second Exodus would be secured through a Passover event. Jesus believed His own death was this second Passover. Thus He didn't merely *time* His death to correspond with Passover, He saw Himself *transforming* the Passover by fulfilling it (Luke 22:14-20).

Just as Jesus needed to be crucified for His death to fulfill the Scriptures (Psalm 22:16; John 3:14-15; Galatians 3:13-14), so it needed to occur at Passover. This primary context, in turn, points to other key themes associated with the Passover motif. Those include *covenant, exile, judgment, liberation, ingathering* and *inhabitation* – the very themes that are fundamental to the overarching scriptural theme of the “kingdom of God.”

- Yahweh pledged a kingdom to Abraham and saw it realized in prototypical form under David and his son Solomon (cf. Genesis 15:1-21, 22:15-18 with 1 Kings 4:20-21; also 2 Samuel 7:1-17 with 1 Chronicles 28:1-10). But as a prototype, David’s kingdom looked to a future, ultimate counterpart – a kingdom to be secured and ruled by his greater covenant son (2 Samuel 7:18-19; Psalm 132).
- The non-ultimacy of David’s kingdom meant that it was ordained to pass away, but its imperfection was the means of its dissolution. Initiated by his own failure, David’s kingdom saw a steady descent into division, disobedience, destruction and dispersion. Yet through all of this Yahweh’s promise stood firm; He had not forsaken His oath and faithfulness to Abraham and David. For that reason the Lord expected Abraham’s house to stand firm in faith, holding tightly to the hope of the day of deliverance and renewal when He would at last establish His promised kingdom (cf. Psalm 89; Isaiah 51-52; Amos 9:11-15; Micah 4:1-5).

In faithfulness to Abraham and His covenant with him, Yahweh had arisen and delivered Abraham’s household from their exile and bondage in Egypt and He would do so again, this time in connection with a messianic deliverer-king (Isaiah 51-52).

- The Egyptian Exodus anticipated David’s kingdom (cf. Exodus 3:1-10, 6:1-8, 19:1-6), and so the second Exodus looked to the kingdom covenanted to David (2 Samuel 7) – the kingdom that would fulfill God’s promise to Abraham.
- The first Exodus had its goal in Israel becoming the light of the nations through their faithful sonship as Yahweh’s covenant kingdom; the second Exodus would see that goal realized as Israel became Israel *indeed* through its share in the Messiah who embodied Israel in truth (Isaiah 53-55; cf. 9:1-7, 11:1-12, 49:1-6).

The first Exodus was the promise of a second one, and this truth framed Israel’s annual Passover commemoration, highlighted by the singing of the Hallel (Psalms 113-118). This feast, which celebrated Yahweh’s faithfulness in the past, also gave expression to Israel’s faith that Yahweh would prove faithful in the future. He would arise as in the days of old to conquer the subjugating power, liberate His captive people and gather them from their exile. And because exile had come upon them because of covenant violation, this second Exodus would see the forgiveness of Israel’s sin and the renewal of the covenant. And all of this was to be accomplished through Yahweh’s Messiah (Isaiah 11:1-9; Jeremiah 31-33; Hosea 1-3; Zechariah 2-3; etc.). Thus Israel’s celebration of the Passover was an act of faith and hope as well as praise and worship. It was a profoundly messianic event centered in the defining Israelite themes of covenant, deliverance and kingdom woven around the central figures of Abraham, David and Messiah.

All four of the gospel writers understood these things and emphasized Jesus' reinterpretation of the Passover in terms of Himself and His covenant-renewing act of self-giving. In order to discern the horrific crucifixion they were about to witness, the disciples needed to view it in terms of the promised new Passover and the judgment, liberation, renewal and ingathering it implied. They, along with all of Abraham's covenant children, had been waiting for the long night of exile to end. That day would see Yahweh's return to Zion to forgive and cleanse the nation's sin (covenant violation) and renew His covenant with them (cf. Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:16-30; Hosea 2:14-23).

By celebrating the Passover with them in the way He did, Jesus was showing His disciples that that long-awaited day had come. And, just as this fellowship meal served to reinterpret the Passover to be fulfilled in His death, so it would be with His resurrection. The prophets had spoken of this latter-day Passover/Exodus as inaugurating a *new-creational* kingdom embracing, not just human beings, but the whole cursed creation. When death had done its worst and Jesus emerged from the tomb, His disciples – and then the whole world through their witness – would be confronted with the shocking truth of this new-creational kingdom and its resurrected King – the King who Himself is its substance and first-fruit, the One in whom the whole creation was to find its life (John 1:3-4, 5:19-27, 6:24-54, 11:11-26; Acts 2:14-36; 1 Corinthians 15; Ephesians 1:9-10).

Though in a less overt way, the same Passover/Exodus themes permeate the Hallel sung every Passover (and at all three of Israel's great pilgrim feasts). The Hallel consists of Psalms 113-118 and they were sung at the Passover meal as a unit. The Hallel was likely the "hymn" mentioned in the gospels (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26). If so, then Jesus and His disciples rehearsed in song in their final moments together the long-standing hope of Israel that was about to be fulfilled in the horror and joy of the coming hours. Again, the Hallel was sung as a unit, which means these psalms must be treated as a whole. When this is done, the great Passover/ Exodus themes emerge in a marvelous arrangement.

- Psalm 113 opens with praise to Israel's God for His condescension in restoring the lowly – specifically, His mercy in making the barren woman fruitful, *a clear echo of Isaiah's prophecy of Israel's restoration in the Messiah* (cf. 50:1, 51:1-55:5).
- Psalm 114 then highlights the Egyptian Exodus and Israel's ingathering to its God.
- Psalm 115 speaks to Israel trusting God's faithfulness in its exile among the nations.
- Psalm 116 has the psalmist worshipping Yahweh for His deliverance – thus the lifting up of the cup of salvation (redemption) at the Passover meal (vv. 12-13).
- Psalm 117, then, invites all nations to praise Yahweh for His lovingkindness toward Israel, for Israel's restoration brings salvation to the Gentiles (ref. again Isaiah 54-55).
- As the capstone, Psalm 118 is, appropriately, deeply messianic. The speaker lauds his trust in Yahweh and confidence of triumph in the face of opposition. The psalm then concludes with praise for the new day of salvation in Yahweh's "cornerstone."