

The Meaning of Pascha

The word *Pascha* comes from the Hebrew word *Pesach*, meaning “Passover.” The Hebrew *Pesach* (פסח), when rendered in Greek and then English letters, becomes *Pascha* (πάσχα). Pascha (not Easter) is the ancient Christian word for the annual commemoration of the Lord Jesus Christ’s Crucifixion and Resurrection in the springtime of the year. “For indeed Christ, our Passover (Gk., *Pascha*), was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast...” (1 Cor. 5:7-8).

The meaning of Pascha, therefore, begins with the meaning of the Jewish feast of Passover, which was eventually fulfilled in the Person and work of the Messiah, the Savior Jesus Christ. Passover refers to the saving act of God delivering His people Israel from the house of slavery in Egypt some 1,500 years before Jesus Christ was born in the flesh of the Virgin.

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We read in the Book of Exodus (12:11-14): “It is the Lord’s Pascha (Pesach/Passover). For I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night and will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute vengeance; I am the Lord. Now the blood (of the lamb slain by each household) shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood (on the doorposts and lintel of each house), I will pass over you; and the plague shall not be on you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. So this day shall be to you a memorial; and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord throughout your generations. You shall keep it as a feast by an everlasting ordinance.”

From this same chapter in Exodus we learn that the Passover happened on the 14th day of the first month of the Hebrew year, corresponding to our months of late March and early April¹. On the 10th day of the month each household was to set aside a blemish-free male lamb (of sheep or goats) in its first year and then slay it on the 14th day at twilight (dusk), putting the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and lintel of the house. The lamb was to be roasted and eaten whole, with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, without breaking a bone of the lamb; whatever of the lamb was left over to the morning was to be burned completely in fire. The Passover was to be eaten in haste, each person dressed and ready to go, because that night, after the death of the firstborn in each home of the Egyptians, the Pharaoh of Egypt immediately sent the Israelites out of that country.

The Passover night and sacrifice was the beginning of the first day in a seven day-long observance termed the Feast of Unleavened Bread with holy convocations on the first and seventh days of the observance (see Ex. 12:15-20; 23:14; Deut. 16:1-8). At the end of the seventh week after Passover, the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost (Gk., *fiftieth* [day]), was observed as a Feast of

¹ The most likely date of Jesus’ crucifixion, hence the date of Passover that year, was April 3 of the year AD 33; see *The Crucifixion of the King of Glory*, by Eugenia Scarvelis Constantinou, (Ancient Faith Publishing, 2021), pg. 326.

Harvest (Ex. 23:16; Lev. 23:9-22; Deut. 16:9-12). According to the Law, at these feasts every male of Israel was to appear before the Lord wherever He put His name and presence (Ex. 23:17); initially, the Lord manifested Himself in the wilderness Tabernacle, and then later in the permanent Temple in the city of Jerusalem. Thus at the time of the Passover in the first century, the population of Jerusalem swelled to enormous numbers of people keeping the feast there².

The meaning of the Passover is multi-layered. First, Passover was the commemoration of God's deliverance of the people of Israel from their sojourn and slavery in Egypt. God liberated the people of Israel to settle in their own homeland, the Promised Land of Canaan, in order to worship and serve God in true faith. "Then you shall tell your son in that day, saying, 'This is done because of what the Lord my God did for me when I came up from Egypt'" (Ex. 13:8). Second, Passover was the redemption of the firstborn, that is, the setting apart by sacrifice the beginning of the next generation of man and beast. The Passover sacrifice was a male lamb without blemish in its first year. "Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord all males that open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem" (Ex. 13:15). Passover is a sign in blood of the covenant (unique relationship) between God and His people. "All the congregation of the children of Israel shall keep it...For no uncircumcised person shall eat it. One law shall be for the native-born and for the stranger who dwells among you" (Ex. 12:43-51).

Pascha (Passover) can refer to the entire action and ceremony of the feast (e.g., the entire meal, the exclusion of yeast for 7 days, etc.), but importantly it refers especially to the sacrifice of the lamb for the feast. "Therefore you shall sacrifice Pascha to the Lord your God..." (Deut. 16:2f.). The sacrificial character of Pascha pertains especially to its fulfillment in the Person of Jesus Christ, who was crucified at the exact time of the slaughtering of the lambs for Passover. "Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour (noon)" (Jn. 19:14); that is, on that Friday after noon, Christ was crucified along with the lambs in the Temple in preparation for the Passover meal which would take place in the evening to begin the next day, the first day of the Jewish Passover feast. So the Gospel records that after His death on the Cross, as that Friday was drawing to a close, the soldiers did not break Jesus' legs: "For these things were done that the Scripture should be fulfilled, 'Not one of His bones shall be broken'" (Jn. 19:36; cf. Ex. 12:46; Num. 9:12 [concerning the Passover lamb]).

The meaning of Pascha is that Jesus Christ is the sacrifice by whose blood we are spared from death, by whom we are delivered from bondage to sin and death, and by whom we are liberated to worship God in His eternal kingdom of rest and joy. Pascha is the realization of a binding relationship (covenant) between God and His people brought to completion in the voluntary death and resurrection of the only-begotten Son of God and Firstborn over all creation (Jn. 1:18; Col. 1:15). This New Covenant Jesus announced and effected to His chosen apostles at

² Based on a reasonable estimate of 18,000 Paschal lambs sacrificed at the ancient feast, and the ancient Jewish average of 10 persons per Paschal lamb, the number of participants (pilgrims) at Passover would have been about 180,000. Since the usual number of inhabitants of Jerusalem was about 50,000, the population of the city at Passover was about 4 times the usual. See *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, by Joachim Jeremias, (Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 77-84.

the beginning of the Preparation Day of the Passover (Thursday evening) when He gave to them the bread and wine changed into His very Body and Blood (Lk. 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). Communion in this Body and Blood of Christ, given and shed on the Cross and raised on the third day, establishes Pascha as the continual, defining power of the Christian people, the Church of Christ. What was commemorated but once a year in the Jewish calendar now forms ceaseless activity of participation (daily and weekly liturgy) in the saving work of Jesus Christ for the faithful (Heb. 8).

When St. John the Baptist declared at the River Jordan: “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn. 1:29), he alluded to the fact that Christ Jesus is the Passover sacrifice, our Pascha, because Christ was eventually slain by crucifixion at the time of the Jewish Passover. The apostle Peter writes: “[Y]ou were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ as of a lamb without blemish and without spot...[whom God] raised from the dead and gave Him glory” (1 Pet. 1:18-19, 21).

Therefore St. John Chrysostom declares that for Christians “It is always Pascha” (*Homily 5 on First Timothy*). At the Divine Liturgy, which is the defining activity of the Christian Church, the assembling of the baptized faithful for Communion of and in Christ, the accomplishment of Christ through His crucifixion and resurrection is established as the reality of the people of God. Delivered from bondage to sin and slavery to the devil, the faithful traverse the time of this fleeting life keeping on the path of God’s commandments toward the incorruptible destination of the eternal Kingdom of God in the heavens. “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness and are dead...I am the living bread which came down from heaven...Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (Jn. 6:49, 51, 54). Christ the Paschal Lamb gives Himself as Daily Bread for the journey out of Egypt to the Promised Land.

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The meaning of Pascha always leads to its fulfillment in the Kingdom of God. Thus Pascha leads to Pentecost, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the faithful bringing them to an ever-increasing measure of God’s grace and knowledge. “It is to your advantage that I go away,” said Christ Jesus to the disciples; “for if I do not go away, the Helper (Gk., *Parakletos*, “Comforter/Advocate”) will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you...He will guide you into all truth” (Jn. 16:7, 13). At the Feast of Pentecost (Acts 2), the apostles came to a final realization of the promises of Christ and began to preach the Gospel without reservation.

In the Orthodox Church, those baptized in water are always sealed with the Holy Chrism, the gift of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:38-42; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; 1 Jn. 2:20, 27), and then given Holy Communion with all the faithful. And during each Divine Liturgy, the Holy Spirit is called down “upon us and upon these Gifts here offered” (the Bread and Wine become the Body and Blood of

Christ), that in the fulfillment of Pentecost Pascha (the death and resurrection of Christ) is actualized in the midst of the people of God for forgiveness, salvation, and sanctification.

Orthodox Pascha is not an attempt to re-create or re-live some historical event. Pascha is not a return to the imagined Jewish roots of the Christian tradition. As St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote, “It is monstrous to talk of Jesus Christ and to practice Judaism. For Christianity did not base its faith on Judaism, but Judaism on Christianity” (*Magnesiensians* 10.3). Pascha is the fulfillment of the promise given by God to the Jews, indeed, to all the faithful who even preceded the Jews (for instance, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob).

We Orthodox Christians are recipients of that promise, that the Savior would destroy the works of the devil and restore His people to life in paradise. What God outlined in shadow, Christ Jesus filled in with the very substance of His body. The God-Man has reconciled us to the Father and leads us by His Spirit (see Isa. 63:8-14). God passes over our iniquity, and by His mercy and grace in Christ we pass through this life to the eternal rest with all the saints.