

ARISE CHRISTIAN MINISTRIES, INC.
Missions Training Course
El Salvador, Misamis Oriental/April 14-May 2, 2008

SOME BACKGROUND NOTES IN UNDERSTANDING EVENTS IN THE GOSPELS

I. The Passover and the Last Supper

The Passover meal followed a fairly standard pattern in every Jewish household. First comes the opening prayer – the blessing of the cup (the first of four cups of wine passed round during the ceremony). Then each person takes herbs and dips them in salt water (Matthew 26:23). The head of the family takes one of the three flat cakes of unleavened bread, breaks it and puts it aside. Then, in response to the youngest member of the family, the story of the first Passover is recounted and Psalms 113, 114 sung. The second cup (Luke 22:17) is filled and passed around.

Before the meal itself, all wash their hands (probably the point at which Jesus washed the disciples' feet, John 13: 4-12), grace is said and bread broken. Bitter herb dipped in sauce is distributed (this was when Jesus gave the sop to Judas, John 13:26). The climax of the ritual is the festive meal of roast lamb.

It was after this that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, breaking the bread laid aside earlier and passing round the third cup of wine, the "cup of blessing." (the words "this is..." in Matthew 26:26,28, must mean "this represents..." since He was Himself there, giving the disciples the bread and wine). The ritual concludes with the singing of the remaining "Hallel" (or Hallelujah) psalms (115-118) and the "Great Hallel", Psalm 136. These psalms are probably the "hymns" Matthew mentions (26:30). Then the final cup of wine is drunk.

The setting of the Lord's Supper at the heart of the Passover meal explains its meaning. Jesus is thinking of Himself as the Passover Lamb, offered up for the deliverance of His people. The wine speaks of His death, and of the new Covenant it ratifies, reconciling God and man. Until He comes again, we are to remember the significance of what He has done for us.

II. The Calendar Months in Ancient Israel

Month Sequence	Name	Equivalent Months in Roman Calendar
1	Nisan (Abib)	Mid March – Mid April
2	Iyyar (Ziv)	Mid April – Mid May
3	Sivan	Mid May – Mid June
4	Tammuz	Mid June – Mid July
5	Ab	Mid July – Mid August
6	Elul	Mid August – Mid September
7	Tishri (Ethanim)	Mid September – Mid October
8	Marchesvan (Bul)	Mid October – Mid November
9	Kislev	Mid November – Mid December
10	Tebet	Mid December – Mid January
11	Shebat	Mid January - Mid February
12	Adar	Mid February – Mid March

III. Feast and Festivals

From very early times the Jewish year was punctuated by the great festivals – the "feasts of the Lord." Some were timed to coincide with the changing seasons, reminding the people of God's constant provision for them, and providing an opportunity to return to God some token of

all that He had given. Others commemorated the great events of Israel's history, the occasions when in an unmistakable way God had stepped in to deliver His people. All were occasions of whole-hearted delight and enjoyment of God's good gifts, and at the same time sober gatherings to seek His forgiveness and cleansing.

They were never intended to be observed out of mere formality and empty ritual. The prophets had sharp words for those who reduced them to this level. The purpose of these festivals was spiritual: a great and glorious meeting of God and His people.

There were probably many local festivals (Judges 21:21), but on three occasions in the year all men were required to attend great national celebrations:

1. Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12:1-20; 23:15). These two feasts, combining pastoral and agricultural elements, were observed together to commemorate Israel's departure from Egypt (Exodus 11-12). The observance began on the fourteenth day of the first month and lasted for a week.
2. The Feast of Weeks/Harvest (Exodus 23:16; Leviticus 23:15-21). Later known as Pentecost, it was celebrated 50 days after the beginning of Passover. It was essentially an agricultural celebration at which the first-fruits of the harvest were offered to God.
3. The Feast of Ingathering/Tabernacles (Exodus 23:16; Leviticus 23:33-43). An autumn festival at the end of the fruit-harvest. The people lived for seven days in shelters made of branches – essentially as an agricultural thanksgiving, but also as a reminder of their tent-dwelling days in the wilderness (Leviticus 23:43).

All these festivals were regarded as “holy,” occasions when all ordinary work stopped. There were also other celebrations (all connected with the number seven).

4. Sabbath. On the seventh day all work was forbidden and the daily sacrifices were doubled. This observance was connected with the completion of God's work of creation (Exodus 20:11), the deliverance from Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:15), and man's simple need for rest and refreshment (Exodus 23:12). After the exile, the Sabbath rules were strictly enforced (Nehemiah 13:15-22), and their observance became one of the outstanding features of Judaism.
5. New Moon. This is often mentioned along with the Sabbath (Isaiah 1:13). Special sacrifices (Numbers 28:11-15), and the blowing of trumpets (Numbers 10:10) were distinctive features of the New Moon festival. There were also special meals and family sacrifices in early times (1 Samuel 20:5, 24), and sometimes prophets were consulted (2 Kings 4:23). On the new moon of the seventh month there was a special Feast of Trumpets (Numbers 29:1).
6. Sabbatical Year. By law, every seventh year the land lay fallow (Leviticus 25:1-7), and every fiftieth year was a Jubilee Year (Leviticus 25:8-34) when mortgaged property was returned to its owners and Hebrew slaves were freed.
7. Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). On the tenth day of the seventh month there was a special annual ceremony of confession and atonement for sin.

There were other feasts not mentioned in the Biblical laws. One was the Feast of Purim (Esther 9) to commemorate the Jewish deliverance from Haman, and later the Feast of Dedication (John 10:22) celebrating the purification of the temple after its desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 BC.