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## WHY PASSOVER?



When Abraham, the first Hebrew, left Ur to follow God's call, he sacrificed a life of comfort and ease. Ur was no small village. It was one of the oldest, most important cities of Mesopotamia, covering an area of about four square miles by the Euphrates River, which empties into the Persian Gulf. The citizens of Ur, numbering well over half a million, lived in walled safety. They enjoyed the advantages of the highest culture and civilization of their time. The outstanding architecture of their temples, which they built in honor of their numerous deities, was a source of great pride.

From the comfort, advantages, and sophistication of Ur, Jehovah called Abraham and his family to a seminomadic way of life. They were not nomads in spirit, for they were headed for the Promised Land, but they did not yet possess it. They

wandered with the seasons, seeking pasture for their flocks, and they also tilled the ground. Tents were their only shelter from the scorching sun and cruel desert wind. But they believed that one day the land really would be theirs, evidenced by their burying those who died along the way in permanent caves.

Then a great drought and famine drove Jacob, a grandson of Abraham, to leave Canaan for the promise of food in Egypt. Once again the seed of Abraham dismantled their tents. Packing all that they had left, they headed south with their wives, their little ones, and their flocks. Because Jacob's son Joseph had found favor with the current pharaoh, they were welcomed as honored guests and given the land of Goshen as their dwelling place (Genesis 47:6). Goshen was a fertile area along the delta of the Nile River, lying in the northeast portion of an area between what is now Cairo to the southeast and Alexandria to the northwest. Here the Hebrews felt respected and secure.

*EGYPT IS OUR HOME—  
WHY BOTHER ABOUT CANAAN?*

**B**ecause of the devastating drought that drove Jacob to seek refuge in Egypt, many of the Egyptians eventually ran out of food too. Some sold their cattle, their land, and finally themselves to Pharaoh in exchange for room and board. Because the pharaohs of that time were of Semitic descent, they favored the seed of Abraham, who also were Semites. For the first time since Abraham left Ur, the Hebrews enjoyed a feeling of permanence. They lived a quiet, secure life in Goshen. The Nile overflowed its banks once a year, bringing life-giving water to the earth. There was lush, abundant pasture for the flocks and rich soil to grow their food.

Here the Hebrews watched their children grow tall and brown in the sun. At night they slept in safety behind the thick walls of their adobe homes. No longer did they wake to the distressed bleating of hungry flocks. Their Egyptian neighbors were people of high morals and advanced culture. Not only did they produce literature and music, but they also knew mathematics and some of the healing arts, and many were skilled architects. They accepted the Hebrews as equals and even bestowed high honors on some of them. Life was pleasant indeed.

Under these circumstances the descendants of Abraham prospered for hundreds of years. Exodus 1:9 indicates they multiplied so fast that a later pharaoh grew concerned that there were more Hebrews than Egyptians in the land. The children of Israel were so comfortable and secure that it was easy to forget that Egypt was not the land God had promised to their fathers. Maybe some of them even forgot God Himself.

They were no longer following God's directives. The covenant Jehovah had made with Abraham was two-sided. On God's part, He promised them land (Genesis 15:18). On Abraham's part, he and his seed were to go where they were told and bear the physical marks of the covenant-circumcision (Genesis 17:10). The Hebrews forgot to seek the Promised Land and forgot to circumcise while they were in Egypt (Joshua 5:5). They would need to be redeemed, to be "deemed again" the people of the covenant, the people of God.

O LORD, FORGIVE OUR COMPLACENCY—  
GET US OUT OF HERE!

**F**or more than four hundred years the Israelites lived at the edge of a volcano without knowing it. The volcano that was Egypt erupted and its flames threatened to consume


them, for there arose a new pharaoh who “did not know about Joseph” (Exodus 1:8). Fearing the strength and power of the vast multitude of Hebrew foreigners, he turned against them and made them his slaves. The children of Israel continued to live in Goshen, but the land no longer belonged to them. Now they belonged to the land, to Egypt, and to the pharaoh. They had to serve him with backbreaking labor, sweating in the fields, building his treasured cities, without compensation or even dignity. There were no strikes or unions to file a complaint. Pharaoh appointed foremen to give his slaves more work than they could do. If a man dropped from exhaustion, the taskmasters left him to die and quickly whipped another into line to take his place.

Under this regime, the children of Israel toiled and suffered, but still they grew in number. Enraged, Pharaoh ordered the Hebrews’ male babies murdered in an attempt to wipe out the entire nation. Then the Israelites remembered the God of their fathers. They knew they needed to be delivered, not only from Pharaoh but also from Egypt. They cried out to God in their bondage and distress, and He heard their anguished pleas. Now that they were ready for His help, He remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. Deliverance was near.

Jehovah could have slain the wicked pharaoh in an instant and brought about a new, more favorable order in Egypt. But that would not have been enough. The sons of Jacob had to leave Egypt in order to serve God. Old things, old attitudes, old affections had to pass away. The nation of Israel also needed a new beginning. Thus the redemption at Passover prepared the sons of Jacob for another covenant to be made at Mount Sinai, which would reestablish and reaffirm them as the nation of God.

The Passover redemption from Egypt changed Israel’s

reckoning of time.<sup>1</sup> God commanded the Hebrews to count the month of the deliverance from Egypt as the first month of the year. He was basically saying, “This event is so historic that you are to rearrange your calendar because of it.” They were to start counting their history from the month of *Nisan*. (Similarly, we mark our history BC and AD, basing our calendar on what happened at Calvary.) The great nation that God had promised to Abraham was about to become a reality.



*Israel's redemption began that night behind  
the safety of blood-sprinkled doors . . .*