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## THE PASSOVER: IS IT A FEAST OR IS IT NOT A FEAST?

A couple of days ago someone sent me a question about "the feast of the Passover", as mentioned in the New Testament. In referring to John 13:1 and to Luke 2:41 the person wrote: "I cannot explain why God would refer to the Passover as a Feast".

The answer is actually amazingly simple:

God DOESN'T refer to the Passover as "A FEAST"!

Let's understand this matter.

### NEW TESTAMENT REFERENCES

There are 4 verses in the N.T. where we find the expression "the feast of the Passover". In two of those passages the words "THE FEAST" are not found in the Greek text ... they were simply provided by the translators at their own discretion. In both cases the words "the feast of" are printed in italics in the KJV, to indicate that these words are not found in the original text. What this does however show is THE BIAS translators have in favour of the Jewish tradition to refer to the Passover as "the feast".

Thus:

Matthew 26:2 reads:

"You know that after two days is (the feast of) the passover, and the Son of man is betrayed to be crucified."

Here Matthew was simply recording Jesus Christ as saying: "after two days is the passover ...". Christ did NOT use the words "the feast of".

Similarly, Mark 14:1 reads:

"After two days was (the feast of) the passover, and of unleavened bread: and ..."

Here Mark was simply recording that: after two days was the Passover, which would then be immediately followed by Unleavened Bread. Mark also did not use the words "the feast of".

That leaves us with just two other verses for consideration: John 13:1 and Luke 2:41. Let's examine them.

### JOHN 13:1

This verse reads as follows:

"Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come ..." (John 13:1)

The Greek text here reads as follows:

"pro de tes heortes tou pascha ..."

The Greek preposition "pro" means "before" and takes the genitive (i.e. possessive) case. "De" is a postpositive conjunction (i.e. it cannot stand first in its own clause and thus usually stands second), which means "and" or "but". "Tes" is the feminine genitive singular case of the definite article (i.e. "the"). And "heortes" is the genitive singular of the Greek noun "heorte". This noun "heorte" is defined in Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament as follows:

"Heorte: Septuaginta for (Hebrew) 'chag', used from Homer down: A FEAST DAY, FESTIVAL ..."

So Thayer's tells us that in the Greek language LXX Old Testament the Hebrew word "chag" is represented by the Greek word "heorte".

The words "tou pascha" are the neuter genitive singular, meaning "of the Passover".

So the Greek text of this verse John 13:1 reads literally:

"And before the feast of the Passover ..."

**BUT THAT STILL DOES NOT MEAN WHAT YOU MAY BE INCLINED TO THINK IT MEANS!**

### THE VITAL KEY TO UNDERSTANDING THIS GREEK TEXT

Last year I wrote an article entitled "God's Holy Days and God's Annual Festivals and Holy Day Offerings". The most important information in that article is that in the Old Testament Hebrew THERE ARE TWO DIFFERENT WORDS WHICH ARE AT TIMES BOTH TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH AS "FEASTS". Those two Hebrew words are "chag" and "mow'ed".

If you have not read that particular article, I suggest you study it before you proceed with this specific subject of "THE FEAST of the Passover". The indiscriminate translation of both of these Hebrew words into the English noun "feast" has resulted in a confused concept of what GOD means when He speaks about "feasts". These two words do in fact have VERY DIFFERENT AND DISTINCT MEANINGS!

Briefly, the Hebrew word "MOW'ED" refers to: a gathering, a getting-together for a Church service, etc. This word does NOT refer to "feasting" and actually has nothing to do with "a feast". The other Hebrew word "CHAG" refers to: feasting, a festival, a celebration, etc.

Both these words are used in Leviticus chapter 23.

So note the following:

Most of the early translators of the Bible into the English language "grew up on" the Latin Vulgate and the Greek LXX of the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures. The Wycliffe translation, for example, is a translation into English from the Latin Vulgate ... John Wycliffe did NOT use either the Hebrew O.T. text or the Greek N.T. text for his translation. Even when subsequent translators understood Hebrew, these translators STILL were very heavily influenced by these two older translations (one into Latin and the

other into Greek).

So here is the point:

BOTH, THE LATIN VULGATE AND THE GREEK LXX, TREAT THE TWO HEBREW WORDS (i.e. MOW'ED and CHAG) AS IF THEY HAVE IDENTICAL MEANINGS! AND THE ENGLISH TRANSLATORS HAVE SIMPLY PERPETUATED THIS ERROR!

Here is the proof.

Let's first look at THE LATIN VULGATE:

Leviticus 23:2

Hebrew reads: "the MOW'EDs of the LORD".

Latin Vulgate reads: "FERIAE Domini".

(Latin "feriae" means festival days, holidays. Compare the German "Ferien".)

Leviticus 23:4

Hebrew reads: "the MOW'EDs of the LORD".

Latin Vulgate reads: "FERIAE Domini".

Leviticus 23:37

Hebrew reads: "the MOW'EDs of the LORD".

Latin Vulgate reads: "FERIAE Domini".

Leviticus 23:44

Hebrew reads: "the MOW'EDs of the LORD".

Latin Vulgate reads: "super SOLLEMNITATIBUS Domini".

(Latin "sollemnitatibus" refers to "SOLEMN DAYS".)

Leviticus 23:6

Hebrew reads: "the CHAG of unleavened bread unto the LORD".

Latin Vulgate reads: "SOLLEMNITAS azymorum Domini".

Leviticus 23:34

Hebrew reads: "the CHAG of tabernacles for seven days".

Latin Vulgate reads: "FERIAE tabernaculorum septem diebus".

(Comment: This shows that our English translation "tabernacles" for the Hebrew word "succoth" comes to us directly from the Latin word "tabernaculum", Latin for "a tent".)

#### Leviticus 23:39

Hebrew reads: "keep a CHAG unto the LORD seven days".

Latin Vulgate reads: "celebrabitis FERIAS Domini septem diebus".

#### Leviticus 23:41

Hebrew reads: "keep it a CHAG unto the LORD seven days".

Latin Vulgate reads: "celebrabitisque SOLLEMNITATEM eius septem diebus".

(Comment: The Vulgate here omits the words "unto the LORD".)

It should now be quite clear WHY these two Hebrew words (i.e. chag and mow'ed) are invariably treated as if they are nothing more than synonyms, when in fact they have totally different meanings. When the Latin Vulgate translates "mow'ed" sometimes as "feriae" and sometimes as "sollemnitas" ... and when it then ALSO translates the word "chag" sometimes as "feriae" and sometimes as "sollemnitas" ... IT IS NO WONDER THAT TRANSLATORS HAVE TREATED THESE TWO HEBREW WORDS AS IF THEY ARE NOTHING MORE THAN SYNONYMS! Even when those translators understood Hebrew, they were still far more familiar with the Latin and the Greek versions.

Let's now look at THE GREEK LANGUAGE LXX of Leviticus chapter 23.

In Leviticus 23:2,4,37,44 the Hebrew word "mow'ed" is used. The LXX always translates this into Greek with the word "heorte", which we have already seen earlier.

In Leviticus 23:6,34,39,41 the Hebrew word "chag" is used. The LXX translates this in verses 6 and 34 into the Greek word "heorte". In verses 39 and 41 it translates it into a verbal form of "heorte" (i.e. "heortasete", second person plural imperative), but with the same basic meaning as "heorte".

So we see that Greek had ONLY ONE WORD for the two distinct Hebrew words "mow'ed" and "chag". Where the Latin did at least have two distinct and different words, but indiscriminately mixed them up when translating these two Hebrew words, the Greek ONLY HAD ONE WORD to express the TWO distinct and different concepts expressed by the two Hebrew words. [Later we will look at another Latin word, "festus".]

This means that when you read the Greek word "heorte" you either have a very clear understanding of the different meanings this word can have in different contexts (i.e. it can mean "mow'ed" and it can also mean "chag"), OR you simply guess and ASSUME that it must have the meaning you choose to attach to this word. In plain terms: you may end up assuming (as do the translators!) that "heorte" always has to mean "feast", or "chag" in Hebrew ... and you overlook that the LXX also proves beyond any shadow of doubt that "heorte" ALSO means "mow'ed" ... and "mow'ed" has nothing at all to do with "FEASTS"!

#### AN ANALOGY IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

It is not uncommon at all for words to have more than one meaning. Take the verb "shoot" for example:

If you are fluent in English, then you have no problems at all distinguishing between:

- a hunter "having a shot at" a buck;
- a soccer-player "having a shot at" goal;
- a pupil "having a shot at" the answer in a test;
- a basketball-player "shooting baskets"; etc..

However, a Chinese person who had never heard a word of English before and who was NOW embarking on a study of the English language, might at first struggle to understand all these varied applications of the word "shoot".

Similarly, a New Testament Jew, who had been exposed to reading Hebrew and/or Aramaic, would grasp that the Greek word "heorte" meant both, "mow'ed" and "chag". So for such a New Testament JEW, who was also fluent in Greek, the word "heorte" would not present any problems ... THE CONTEXT would always tell him whether "heorte" should refer to "mow'ed" or whether it should refer to "chag"; it would be no more difficult than for us to know when the word "shot" referred to goals and when it referred to hunting animals.

[Comment: By the time of the New Testament the Jews in general had come to view the Passover as a "chag". It is the disciples of Jesus Christ who would have come to understand that there should in fact be a distinction between a "chag" and a "mow'ed". But they would still have been limited by the words available to them in the Greek language.]

But for us English-speakers who have neither a background in Greek nor in the Hebrew/Aramaic language, we would like to settle for "heorte" always having one and the same meaning ... "A FEAST"! But such a conclusion is simply not justified.

Going back to the Apostle John and to John 13:1:

IF John had been writing in Hebrew, THEN he could have very clearly referred to "the MOW'ED of Passover" and he certainly would NOT have used the phrase "the CHAG of Passover", since Passover is not a "chag" at all. But since John was LIMITED TO THE GREEK LANGUAGE, all he could do was refer to "the HEORTE of Passover", as the Greek language simply did not put any other word at his disposal to express the concept of the Hebrew word "mow'ed".

The Greek Language LXX PROVES that "heorte" was used to translate the Hebrew word "mow'ed". So now we are ready to recognize A PARTIAL FLAW in Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon, referred to earlier.

It is CORRECT BUT MISLEADING for Thayer's to state that "heorte" is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew "chag", while omitting any references to "mow'ed", because the LXX makes quite clear that "heorte" is ALSO the Greek equivalent for "mow'ed". And "chag" and "mow'ed" differ considerably in their meanings. So "heorte" must have two distinct and different meanings in New Testament usage, as far as translating Hebrew words is concerned, because it is used to translate two distinctly different concepts (i.e. "chag" and "mow'ed").

Thus:

It is quite acceptable in biblical Greek to refer to "the HEORTE of Passover" without in any way meaning to imply that the Passover is "A FEAST"! The only implication is that the Passover is "a MOW'ED", which is precisely what Leviticus 23:4 tells us ... verse 4 is the preface for what we are told in verse 5.

This is also further explained in my article on the Holy Days and the Festivals, referred to earlier. That article also explains that, while the term "mow'ed" DOES apply to the Passover, this does NOT make the Passover "a Holy Day". Leviticus chapter 23 lists 8 different days as "mow'ed" days ... the Passover plus the 7 annual Holy Days. All 7 of the Holy Days are distinctly and explicitly defined as "HOLY CONVOCATIONS", and it is this term "holy convocation" that identifies a day as "a HOLY Day". The Passover is "a mow'ed day" (i.e. a day on which we gather together for an observance), but it is NOT "a holy convocation".

With this background, it should now also be quite easy to understand the reference to "the feast (heorte) of the passover" in Luke 2:41. There should be no need for us to discuss this particular verse in detail.

Let's look at another Scripture which ties in here.

### LUKE 22:1

This verse reads:

"Now the feast of unleavened bread drew near, which is called the Passover."

The Greek text for this verse reads as follows:

"eggizen de he heorte ton azumon he legomene pascha."

And the Latin Vulgate text of this verse reads:

"adpropinquabat autem dies festus azymorum qui dicitur pascha."

The Greek text reads "he heorte ton azumon", meaning "the feast of unleavened (bread)". The Latin Vulgate says basically the same thing ("dies festus azymorum"), though it has added the word "dies", meaning "day" or "appointed time" or "space of time", etc.

[Comment: The Latin noun "feriae" is a plural noun which focuses on a number of days grouped together, i.e. festival DAYS, holidays, etc.. The Latin noun "festus" (from which we get the English word "feast") is a singular noun which focuses on the occasion rather than on the number of days involved, i.e. festival, feast, etc.. These words basically refer to the same thing with a slightly different emphasis.

But we see a bit of inconsistency here in the Latin Vulgate translation. The expression "THE FEAST of unleavened bread" is translated in Leviticus 23:6 as "sollemnitas azymorum", and in Luke 22:1 it is translated as "dies festus azymorum". These two verses obviously refer to the identical period of time, but the Vulgate is not consistent. What this SHOULD show us is this: It would have been FAR BETTER to also have translated Leviticus 23:6 with the words "dies festus" because that is precisely what the Hebrew there implies! To have rendered Leviticus 23:6 as "sollemnitas" has only served to obscure the real meaning ... by introducing, without any justification (!), the concept of "a SOLEMN feast". The Hebrew word "chag" does NOT justify the idea of "SOLEMN".]

But the interesting words in the Greek text here are: "legomene pascha". "Legomene" is the present passive participle of the verb "lego", meaning: to say, to speak, to call, etc.

So this verse is telling us that WHAT THE BIBLE CALLS "the feast of unleavened bread" THE JEWS WERE CALLING "the Passover". This is important to understand!

Luke made this comment here in Luke 22:1 to help his readers at the time CLEARLY IDENTIFY the period of time he was talking about. This tells us that the Jews in the early New Testament period were ALREADY no longer using the expression "the Feast of Unleavened Bread"! They were using the expression "the Passover" or "the feast of the Passover". Apart from this verse here (Luke 22:1), the expression "the feast of unleavened bread" never appears anywhere else in the Greek text of the entire New Testament. It appears in the English text of Matthew 26:17, but there is no word for "feast" in the Greek text ... and therefore in the KJV the words "feast of" appear in italics. So we should realize that had the authors of the N.T. used the expression "THE FEAST OF UNLEAVENED BREAD" without any explanatory comments, there would have been some Jews who would not have understood the precise period of time that was being referenced. It was therefore necessary for Luke to point out that he was speaking about THE FEAST which the Jews were already calling "the Passover".

Understand that Luke 22:1 is NOT saying that it is correct to refer to the Feast of Unleavened Bread as "the Passover"! It is NOT correct to do so! What Luke 22:1 is telling us is that THE JEWS, IN COMMON USAGE AT THAT TIME, were calling the Feast of Unleavened Bread "the Passover". This was wrong; but that's what they did! And Luke has recorded this for us. The people, and not God, were calling the Feast of U.B. "the Passover".

Understand also that this Jewish bias of wanting to see the Passover referred to as "a feast" makes their opinions unreliable. For example: I have checked the "Hebrew-English New Testament"; and in both, John 13:1 and Luke 2:41, they have translated the Greek "heorte" of Passover back into Hebrew as the "chag" of Passover, even though Leviticus chapter 23 makes abundantly clear that the Passover is a "mow'ed" and not a "chag". It could also be argued, in view of Luke's comment in Luke 22:1, that in John 13:1 and in Luke 2:41 both authors were simply expressing themselves in the terms that were in current use at that time, to make themselves understood:

i.e.: Since the Jews at that time had postponed their observance of the Passover into the start of the 15th day of the first month and since they referred to THE ENTIRE PERIOD as "the feast of the Passover", therefore John and Luke used this expression, which was in common use, to help their readers know what they were talking about. In that sense the expression "the feast of the Passover" would have referred to the entire 8-day period ... the Passover day plus the Seven Days of Unleavened Bread. Mark 14:1, which we saw earlier, shows these two (i.e. Passover and Days of U.B.) being linked together into one continuous period.

That should suffice for Luke 22:1.

### IN SUMMARY

The keys to understanding the expression "the feast of the Passover" in the New Testament are:

- 1) There are TWO distinct and different words in the O.T. Hebrew text of Leviticus chapter 23, and these two words have different meanings.
- 2) The Greek language had a word to express the concept of "chag", i.e. a feast. That word is "heorte". But the concept of "A HOLY DAY" which had nothing to do with "feasting", which was simply set aside to appear before God on a national basis for the purpose of receiving teaching and instruction, was foreign to the Greeks ... so they didn't have a word to express this concept.

3) So when the O.T. Hebrew was translated into Greek, the Greek word "heorte" was also used to convey the meaning of "mow'ed" ... there was no other Greek word available for this purpose.

4) Anyone with a background in Hebrew (i.e. the New Testament apostles and writers) would not have had any difficulty in distinguishing between the "heorte of Passover" and the "heorte of Tabernacles" (the first one is a "mow'ed", the second one is a "chag") ... any more than you have a difficulty in distinguishing between a hunter having "a shot at" a buck and a sportsman having "a shot at" goal. Familiarity with the culture is the key to a correct understanding, rather than the most common meaning of the Greek word in question.

5) So when you see the expression "the feast of the Passover" in the New Testament, realize that TECHNICALLY this is a correct translation of the word "heorte", but that is NOT the meaning the author (John or Luke) had in mind. The author was simply referring to "the MOW'ED of Passover", as explained in Leviticus chapter 23, and the only word available in the Greek language at that time was for the author to also use the word "heorte".

So, to get back to our original question: God does NOT really refer to the Passover as "a feast". God clearly refers to it as a "mow'ed" day in the Old Testament. But a limitation of the N.T. Greek language forced the N.T. authors to translate this Hebrew word "mow'ed" into Greek as "heorte". It is also unlikely that the pagan Greeks would have grasped a religious difference between the Hebrew words "chag" and "mow'ed", as they had nothing in their own culture to help them see a distinction between a "chag" occasion and a "mow'ed" day ... this would have compounded their difficulty. The N.T. authors would have understood this difference; but they had to express themselves within the constraints of the Greek language. So they had to use the word "heorte" to also refer to a "mow'ed" day.

And that's about it.

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