



Celebrating
EXODUS

Home-based rituals for Christians

**Bat Kol Institute
Jerusalem**

A note to the reader:

This booklet proposes a new practice for Christians: home-based Exodus rituals. Its offering is a work-in-progress, and those who take up the suggestions within are pioneers in the development of such a practice. Your feedback and the sharing of your experience of implementing a Christian Exodus ritual provides valuable input to future presentations of this material. Bat Kol Institute is grateful to receive your comments at the email address below.



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Website: www.batkol.info
Administration: admin@batkol.info

Text: Teresa Pirola, Bat Kol alumna, Sydney, Australia.
Illustrations: Francine Pirola.
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Why a Christian Exodus ritual?

The Book of Exodus is a sacred text for both Jews and Christians. It features prominently in the Jewish festival of *Pesach* (Passover) and the Christian celebration of Holy Thursday and Easter. It tells of the Israelites' going out (exodus) from the slavery of Egypt into a new life of freedom, a decisive moment in salvation history when the God of the Israelites triumphed over the forces of oppression. It marks a new stage in the Israelites' self-understanding as a chosen people.

This story of liberation, central to the Jews, is also our story as Christians. As followers of Jesus, himself a Jew, we are spiritually immersed in the story of the ancient Hebrews. Their journey as a people into an ever-deepening relationship with God is part of our own biblical and spiritual ancestry. Like the Jews, our remembrance calls for a sense of vital presence. Thus Christians can say that we, too, went out from Egypt, crossed the Red Sea and were there at Sinai.

Each year at *Pesach*, the Jews tell the Exodus story by way of a home-based ritual. This is the *Seder* meal, involving symbolic foods, prayers and actions laid out in the *Haggadah* (ritual manual). In recent decades, some Christians have also participated in *Seders*, as did the early Christians for the first 300 years of the Common Era.

The beauty of the Jewish practice, and the enthusiasm with which some contemporary Christians have embraced it, raises the question: why not develop home-based Exodus rituals for Christians; rituals drawing inspiration from the *Seder* without co-opting Jewish practice; rituals based on our shared biblical heritage while respecting the inevitable differences that arise in interpretation of the Exodus event?

This booklet invites Christians to explore the concept of an Exodus ritual in the faith environment of their own homes, and offers ideas for getting started.



Passover fact

The *seder* is the main ritual by which Jews celebrate *Pesach* (Passover). Yes, there is synagogue worship too, but the home-based *Seder* meal is central. The term 'seder', in Hebrew, means 'order' and it refers to the order of the meal's readings and rituals.



Passover fact

The ritual of the *Seder* as practiced in Jewish homes today finds its basis in post-Second Temple rabbinic tradition, not the Bible. It is not the Temple-based Passover meal described in scripture and therefore not ‘what Jesus did’.

What might a Christian Exodus ritual look like?

How might Christians develop their own Exodus ritual? Let’s imagine a scenario...

A storytelling ritual of the domestic church

Without copying the Jews, we can draw inspiration from their *Seder*. To begin with, we recognize the value of holding it at the meal table in the home. Certainly, the ritual can be extended to other community-based settings (parish, classroom), but here we take the ‘domestic church’ as our starting point. Inspired by the family-orientation of the *Seder*, as well as the biblical command to explain to our children the significance of Passover (Ex 12:26), we might design a question-and-answer dialogue for involving the whole household (or parish group) in the telling of the Exodus story. E.g.,

Why do we gather on this night?

To tell the story of God’s chosen people...

Why do we remember the story of the Passover?

So that we may know that our God saves...

The telling of the Exodus liberation unfolds in one’s own words, spiced with personal and creative interpretation, peppered with songs and symbols and using evocative “I wonder” questions with children. E.g., *I wonder how the Israelites felt standing at the edge of the Red Sea...* This dramatic storytelling can be complemented with selected readings from scripture as well as other texts. For those with access to Jewish sources, a rabbinic saying or midrash provides a most fitting illumination. Discussion and the sharing of personal and communal liberation experiences are to be encouraged, continuing at leisure over the meal.

Symbols

Our Christian Exodus ritual takes up those Passover symbols mentioned in our shared scriptures—the lamb, unleavened bread, bitter herbs—as a way of

identifying with biblical events. It also includes wine, the ‘fruit of the vine,’ for its potent biblical imagery.

Further, it lends itself to being developed into a series of similar but distinct rituals held in Lent. Recognizing the stories within the Story, each ritual can tell a portion of Exodus. Come Holy Week, how ready our hearts would be to hear the Book of Exodus publicly read in church: the accounts of the Passover (Holy Thursday) and the crossing of the Red Sea (Easter Vigil).

Prayer

Prayer time follows the storytelling: prayers of thanksgiving for the gifts of liberation in our lives and in our world; prayers of petition for deliverance from the bonds that still hold us enslaved. A fitting inclusion is a prayer of gratitude for the fidelity of the Jews, and all heirs of the Torah who have kept alive the power of the Exodus story. We might finish with a brief around-the-table statement of commitment, followed by a concluding prayer or song.

Note: It is advisable to keep the ritual uncomplicated. Christ-connections can be included, but they should not dominate. Remember: come Easter we will be celebrating the resurrection for weeks... a whole season! But for now, our focus is Exodus, a salvific event worthy of reflection in its own right, drawing us close in spirit to the Jewish people while respecting the integrity of their—and our—sacred traditions.

Exodus and Easter

Whatever the actual workings of such a ritual(s), let us revisit the question: why hold it in the first place? A ritualized remembering of the Exodus event in a Christian home has the power to unite a family more closely with the historical Jesus and with his people who came out of Egypt. As Christians we are enriched by the Jewish interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures, and we also interpret them in the light of the Christ-event. However, a sad fact of our 2000-year church



Passover fact

Was the Last Supper a Passover meal? Although it is clear from the Gospels that Jesus went up to Jerusalem at Passover time, scholars are divided as to whether the Last Supper was actually a Passover meal.

The title ‘Red Sea’ is often used in place of ‘Reed Sea’. While the latter is a literal translation of *yam suph*, historical and geographical factors lead to ongoing scholarly debate of the matter.



history is the glib way with which we have gone about this interpretation, using the Hebrew scriptures as a springboard for what we ‘really’ want to say about Jesus, rather than appreciating the significance of the redemptive message in itself. Due to potent mix of historical influences (e.g., early church-synagogue tensions, supersessionist theologies, anti-semitic prejudices), Christians have too often read the Old Testament as a join-the-dots exercise for revealing the Christian message, rather than as an essential part of our saving experience without which the New Testament and the core proclamation of Christianity make no sense at all.

A simple analogy may help. Think of a love story: a man and woman meet, fall in love and celebrate a magnificent wedding. The moment of their first meeting will forever point to the wedding, but this does not prevent them from reliving the experience of their first meeting in all its glorious detail: romantic, humorous, difficult or mundane. When retelling the story of their first date, they don’t skip over the event so as to talk about the wedding. Rather, they dwell upon the detail for what it speaks of that moment: he said this, she did that... By dwelling upon the detail, nothing about the wedding is undermined. On the contrary! Reveling in the first part of the love story underscores the beauty of that culminating event.

As Christians we need to give ourselves permission to revel in the first testament of our love story as an emerging people, joining with our Jewish brothers and sisters in celebrating the transformative power of the Exodus story in its own right, milking it for its salvific message without the compulsion to fast-forward to New Testament conclusions. Only when we have soaked in the wellsprings of the Hebrew scriptures, can we understand the power of what happened on that first day of the week, near dawn, when a handful of Jewish women made their way to the burial tomb of a recently-crucified Jewish man.

A sample EXODUS ritual

Preparation

Table setting: Uncluttered, with room for symbols to be placed and in view of all.

Atmosphere: ‘Special,’ making use of candles and lamplight to give the hint of a campfire around which we gather to tell stories.

Climate of hospitality: Lots of warmth, welcome.

Meal: As simple or as elaborate as you wish. Avoid burdening one person with kitchen responsibilities. Encourage all to be involved in preparations.

Symbols: Use those found in scripture; e.g.,

Bitter herbs (Ex 11:8) signify the bitterness of Egyptian bondage. Horseradish or rocket (a bitter-tasting leafy vegetable) can suffice.

Unleavened bread or *matzah* (Ex 11:8; 12:39) reminds us of the haste with which the Hebrews left Egypt as the dough had no time to rise.

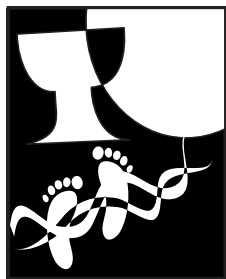
Lamb was the animal sacrificed, roasted and eaten as part of the original Passover meal (Ex 11:5,8). In our ritual the lamb can be served at table as either a symbolic portion or as the basis of the meal.

A cup of wine, although not mentioned as part of the original Passover meal, has biblical significance. Here it is shared as a symbol of our communion as God’s chosen people. We stand ‘with’ one another in the painful times of bondage and in the joy of deliverance.

Aim for symbols that are big, bold and abundant; e.g., not just one sprig of herbs, but a large, fresh bunch.

Storytelling: Ahead of time, assign table guests a portion of the Exodus story. Invite each to prepare a creative telling of that part of the story (see p.12) and to bring a personal symbol that speaks to the story.





I recall an 'Exodus experience' in my own life when:

- * I recovered from surgery;
- * I overcame a personal obstacle;
- * I discovered God in my life;
- * I nursed my child through a long illness;
- * I volunteered for a prison visitation ministry.

A sample EXODUS ritual

Greeting and introduction

Welcome by name each person at table.

Candle lighting

To signal the ritual's start, dim the lights. Then light a large central candle (or a series of small ones) on the table. A hint of a campfire gathering.

Opening question

One person at table asks the question:

Why do we gather on this night?

Another responds:

*We come here to commemorate
wondrous events that happened long ago,
and which still touch us today.*

*We come here to tell a story:
of a time when our ancestors-in-faith lived as slaves
and how God raised up Moses
to lead them to freedom.*

*We gather to remember the Passover night,
when our ancestors shared a meal, eaten in haste,
as they made ready to leave Egypt
for an unknown future.*

*We gather to remember that their story
is our story too.*

Symbolic gesture

As a symbolic stance, all rise for a minute, reminiscent of the readiness of the Israelites to depart from Egypt (Ex 11:11). During that minute you might (a) sing a gathering song; (b) read scripture, e.g., Ex 12:41-42; (c) recite a poem; or (d) stand in silence.

The telling of the Exodus story

Ex 7:14-15:21

Be seated. One by one, those at table contribute to the telling of the Exodus story, placing themselves into the story as if they were among the Israelites, eyewitnesses to their suffering and their salvation.

The telling of the Exodus story

Part A. The plagues and Pharaoh's hardened heart. Ex 7:14-10:29

Step 1: Storyteller 1 briefly sets the scene:

In the face of Pharaoh's refusal to free us, God intervened. A series of plagues came upon the land...

Step 2: One person at table asks the question:

Where were you during this time of affliction? What did you see? What did you hear? What did you feel? Tell us what it was like at the time of the plagues.

Step 3: Storyteller 1 creatively tells the story:

e.g., *As I imagine myself there, this is what I see, hear, feel...*

The (which?) scene especially spoke to me (why?), and reminded me of this song. Join me in singing...

I recall an event in my life (or world history) that evokes a similar Exodus memory. This is what happened...

Let me share with you this symbol I brought along which depicts that moment (show and describe)...

Step 4: When Storyteller 1 has finished, a person asks: *Why do we remember the story of the plagues?*

Step 5: From his/her unique perspective, Storyteller 1 sums up the significance of the story for us today. E.g., *There are hardships in our lives beyond our control, yet we have faith that God brings us through them and, mysteriously, even uses them for God's glory.*

Step 6: Storyteller concludes by saying: *This is the story of the plagues, the story of our people. May God be praised, may the Lord continue to save us.*

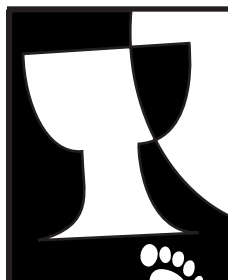
All: *May God be praised, may the Lord continue to save us.*

Step 7: As a symbolic gesture to close this section, we pass the plate of 'bitter herbs' as a reminder of the bitterness of slavery. Take, touch, smell, taste.



What 'plague' or affliction is part of your life story?

E.g., chronic headaches, bullying, financial anxiety, addictions, daily irritations, drought conditions for farmers, natural disaster, political wranglings.



The events of Exodus are all too familiar to refugee families of every era.

"In the early '80s, Stan, a refugee 'boat person' was a regular visitor to our family home. He had made a perilous journey by sea to escape unjust imprisonment and to forge a new life for his family. He harbored tragic memories and yet exhibited unfailing hope, and a fierce faith in God's protective hand."

Part B. Final plague, Passover meal and ritual prescriptions for celebrating Passover.

Ex 11:1-13:16

Step 1: Storyteller 2 briefly sets the scene:

The final plague dealt a fatal blow to firstborn children. As death swept through the land of Egypt, our homes were miraculously "passed over." On that night we celebrated a Passover meal and Pharaoh gave in to Moses' plea to "let my people go."

Step 2: One person at table asks the question:

Where were you on this final night in Egypt? What did you see? What did you hear? What did you feel? Tell us what it was like at the time of the Passover.

Step 3: Storyteller 2 creatively tells the story:

e.g., As I imagine myself there, this is what I see, hear, feel...

The (which?) scene impresses me (why?), and reminds me of a favorite poem... Let me recite it for you...

I recall an event in my life (or history) that evokes a similar exodus memory. This is what happened...

Let me share with you this photograph I brought along which depicts that moment (show & describe)...

Step 4: When Storyteller 2 has finished, a person asks:
Why do we remember the story of the Passover?

Step 5: From his/her unique perspective, the storyteller sums up the story's significance for us today. E.g.,
God's call often leads us outside our comfort zone! The familiarity of our pain can appear more secure than stepping into an unknown future.

Step 6: Storyteller 2 concludes by saying: *This is the story of the Passover, the story of our people. May God be praised, may the Lord continue to save us.*

All: May God be praised, may the Lord continue to save us.

Step 7: As a symbolic gesture to close this section, we pass a basket of unleavened bread, a reminder of the hasty departure from Egypt. Take, touch, smell, taste.

Part C. Journey of the Hebrews out of Egypt, crossing of the Red Sea, defeat of Pharaoh's army.

Ex 13:17-15:21

Step 1: Storyteller 3 sets the scene:

We left in haste, taking unleavened bread as provisions since the dough had no time to rise. Pharaoh's army pursued us with deadly intent and would surely have destroyed our company of Hebrew refugees had not our God intervened with a miracle: parting the Red Sea. We passed through on dry ground, and the waters rolled back to consume our enemies.

Step 2: One person at table asks the question:

Where were you during this time of Exodus? What did you see? What did you hear? What did you feel? Tell us what it was like at the time of the departure from Egypt, and the drama at the Red Sea.

Step 3: Storyteller 3 creatively tells the story: e.g.,

As I imagine myself there, this is what I see, hear...

The (which?) scene touches me (why?), and reminds me of a popular song by... Let me play it for you...

I recall an event in my life (or history) that evokes a similar Exodus memory. This is what happened...

Let me share with you this medallion I brought along which depicts that moment (show & describe)...

Step 4: When Storyteller 3 has finished, a person asks: *Why do we remember the story of the Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea?*

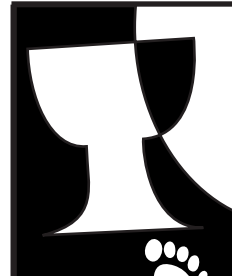
Step 5: From his/her unique perspective, the storyteller sums up the story's significance for us today....

Step 6: Storyteller 3 concludes by saying:

This is the story of the Hebrews' rescue from slavery, the story of our people. May God be praised, may the Lord continue to save us.

All: *May God be praised, may the Lord continue to save us.*

Step 7: Sing together a rousing song of joy, reflecting the sentiments of the Song at the Sea (Ex 15:1-21).



Songs with an Exodus theme:

- * *Travelin' Thru* (Dolly Parton)
- * *Tell it on the Mountain* (Peter, Paul & Mary)
- * *We Shall Overcome* (African-American spiritual)
- * *Freedom Now* (Tracy Chapman)
- * *Higher Ground* (John Denver)



Post-biblical Exodus stories

* Abolition of slavery
(USA)

* Dismantling of
apartheid (SA)

* Fall of Berlin wall
(Germany)

* *Solidarity* trade
union movement
(Poland)

* People's revolution
that overthrew Mar-
cos (Philippines)

Concluding prayers:

One person leads the group in a concluding prayer:

Lord God, God of mercy and justice!

You heard the cry of your people, Israel,
and brought them out of slavery to freedom.

By faith we were born into this people.

We stand in awe of all that we have seen and heard,
of the ways you have saved and rescued,
healed and made whole,
in the time of Moses, down to our own day.

We give thanks especially for.....

(pause to allow people to name their own intentions).

God of freedom,

We know you continue to hear the cries of your
children wherever they are heartbroken and in distress.

We are mindful especially of.....

(pause to allow people to name their own intentions).

We join our prayers with theirs
as we wait with expectant hope
for fullness of life and liberation.

Come, Lord God, redeem us.

And may your liberating ways flow out from us.

All: Amen!

Leader continues:

May we never forget the gift of our Hebrew
ancestors, the people into whom

by faith we were born,

and the God who makes us all His children.

Your cup is mine,

and together we drink at the well of salvation.

Symbolic gesture: All drink from the one cup of wine.

Conclude with a sign of peace.

Let the meal begin! Continue your reflections and
stories over the meal.

Alternative ways to plan your ritual:

* Hold the concluding prayers at the end of the meal.

* Then again, the storytelling could be spread over the
duration of the meal.

More ideas for rituals

By holding three Exodus rituals during Lent, the entire Exodus story can be told as preparation for Easter. A suggested division of scripture portions follows:

Ritual I. Ex 1:1-7:13

- * The enslavement of Jacob's descendents in Egypt.
- * The birth of Moses and his rescue from the Nile.
- * Moses' call and commissioning. The burning bush.
- * Moses returns to Egypt and confronts Pharaoh.

Ritual II. Ex 7:14-15:21

- * The plagues and Pharaoh's hardness of heart.
- * The final plague. Passover ritual prescriptions.
- * Journey out of Egypt. Crossing of the Red Sea.

Ritual III. Ex 15:22-40:38

- * Journey through the wilderness.
- * The covenant at Sinai, made, lost and restored.
- * Construction of the ark of the covenant.
- * Arrival at the promised land. Death of Moses.

More ideas for symbols

Burning bush: Candles, sticks and foliage.

The burden of slavery: a heavy stone; twisted wire.

Desert/wilderness: sand, cactus.

A troubled path: gravel, rocks.

Temporary dwellings: hessian (burlap) or canvas.

Wilderness journey: dusty sandals.

Experiment with bodily gestures: clenched fists, open palms, outstretched arms, bowed heads, eyes closed, hands held, embraces (e.g., a sign of peace).

Where to find Exodus images

Newspapers, magazines, photo albums, websites, artwork on a wall, a souvenir from a vacation. DVD movie titles (for pre-ritual inspiration or entertainment later in the evening): *Ghandi*, *Freedom Writers*, *Romero*, *Spiderman*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Amazing Grace*, *As It Is In Heaven*.

Simplify for children

Short passages. Simple songs. A child explaining his/her drawing is a wonderful form of storytelling.



A prayer of gratitude for the Jewish people.

We give thanks for our Jewish brothers and sisters, for their fidelity to the covenant, and for the way they have preserved the vitality of the Exodus story in their life and worship. May we continue to draw inspiration from their witness...



Creative storytelling

The storyteller creatively tells the story:

- * As if he/she were an eyewitness;
- * Drawing on scripture, midrash, song, poetry;
- * Drawing on post-biblical stories (from one's personal or family life, from historical events);
- * Drawing on visual, audible, tactile symbols.

Ex 14:15

'YHWH (pron. Yah) said to Moses: Why do you cry out to me? Speak to the Children of Israel, and let them march forward!'

One delightful midrash has God say to Moses at the edge of the Red Sea, 'There is time to be brief, and time to be lengthy. My children are in great distress, the sea is enclosing them, the enemy is in pursuit, and you stand there praying away! 'Speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward (Ex14:15).'
(Exodus Rabbah 21:8)

Why this creative, interactive approach? Why not simply read scripture? Actually, you will read scripture to prepare for this! What we are trying to achieve here is a sense of personal participation and vital presence. In fact, the Exodus story is the story of each person's life, and the story of every family and every people. Haven't we all, in one way or another, made a journey from slavery to freedom?

e.g. Freed from: *a poor self-image; a destructive relationship; an addiction or illness; a lack of hope; Pharaoh-like arrogance, self-made designs for my life; a dull, lifeless routine; a fruitless pattern of behavior.*

* How did God's 'mighty hand and outstretched arm' intervene? Through what/whom? In what ways am I still making the passage from slavery to liberation?

* What movements from bondage to freedom do you observe in family; parish; neighborhood; nation; world?

* And who are the 'Moses figures' of our times?
Martin Luther King. Dorothy Day. Lech Walesa. Oscar Romero. Nelson Mandela. Jean Vanier. Ghandi.

* What struggles for freedom have I undertaken with and for others? What 'saving work' claims my time and energies? Recognition of a minority group? Indigenous reconciliation? Welfare of children, born and unborn? Ecological awareness? The cause of peace? Interfaith dialogue? Renewal within the Church?

* By getting in touch with the Exodus events in our own lives we can identify in a fresh way with the experiences of the ancient Hebrews. We can grasp

more fully the mystery of our spiritual relationship with Judaism that enables us to say: *I was there in Egypt. I, too, crossed the Red Sea.* Time and geography are transcended through bonds of faith. We are disciples of Jesus, the Jew. His people become our people. And God's redemptive acts continue through history.

* In telling the story, pause to illustrate a particular scene by singing a song or playing a piece of music. The choice of songs need not be overtly religious. Encourage people to explore the pop charts, old time favorites, folk tunes, movie sound tracks, their ethnic background, children's songs. They can be sung together, performed solo, or listened to on CD. A soulful instrumental piece may speak louder than verse and bring a reflective pause to the storytelling.

* Let children and teenagers find their own level of participation. A nursery rhyme or heavy metal track may not seem to you to be the best choice as a liberation song, but if it speaks to them and involves them it is the perfect song.

* The idea of bringing symbols to support the storytelling is to enhance awareness of Exodus as a 'today' experience. It is one thing to refer to the Bible story, it is another thing to view a photo of a refugee family sponsored by the local parish, or an empty syringe as a symbol of an addiction overcome.

* Adapt the number of stories and storytellers according to your circumstances. An Exodus ritual might consist of a telling of just one portion of the story. It might be told elaborately or simply. Try storytelling partnerships. A non-religious person may not wish to tell the scripture story but may be happy to contribute a freedom story of their own.

* Not included in the sample ritual, but a good suggestion, is to invite action commitments. E.g., How will I live out the gift of God's freedom this week? I will reach out to a neighbor, adopt a positive attitude, join in a social justice initiative, etc.



The steps outlined in this home-based ritual can be easily adapted for other kinds of community gatherings such as a parish group or a classroom setting. Keep in mind the key elements: vibrant storytelling, flexible ritual, care for persons, celebration of faith.

Done well, the storytelling should allow for a range of emotions to be expressed: joy, tears, wonder, laughter, sober pondering, humor.



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