




# Analysis of the Origins and Traditions of Unleavened Bread (מַצוֹת) and Passover Feast (פֶּסַח) in Deuteronomy 16:1–8: Redactional Relevance for Today

Fr. Prof. Michael Ufok Udoekpo  
Biblical Studies, Department of Theology  
Veritas University, Abuja, Nigeria  
ufokism@yahoo.com(\*correspondence)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7953-3392>

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## Abstract

Deuteronomy 16:1–8, a “festival (אָה) calendar,” is a combination or updating of various earlier traditions (J. E. P) of the feasts of Passover (פֶּסַח) and Unleavened Bread (מַצוֹת). This multiplicity of tradition to be discussed, and sources affirms the lack of scholarly consensus and approaches as regard investigation on the sources that make the final composition of the theology of the Pentateuch. Among other things, the text stresses and promotes the important idea and practice of having a central place of where, where the Lord has chosen to place his name (v. 2b). Conscious of past debates on this passage, this work, aware on current dynamism and flexibility in methods of exegesis and hermeneutical approaches, this work contextually, historically and theologically discusses the origins of the festivals. It narrates, translates, exegetes and argues for the different sources that make up the stories within the context of the Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy–2 Kings). Of course, the Deuteronomistic theologians adapted the stories told in earlier traditions of Exodus 12 –13, 23; 34:18–26, Leviticus 23 and Numbers 28:16–25, to advance their own socio-political and theological purposes. Finally, the work inexhaustibly, lists the theological relevance of the pericope to include, denunciation of proliferation inordinate and abusive worship centers and the worship of YHWH alone manifested in Christ of the New Testament.

**Keywords:** Passover (פֶּסַח); Unleavened Bread (מַצוֹת), Cult Centralization, YHWH-alone.

## Introduction

The Pentateuchal theological stories and narratives were told in reference to others, which they adapted, corrected or improved upon for theological reasons. Deuteronomy 16:1–8, a “festival (אָה) calendar,” for instance is a combination or updating of various earlier traditions (J. E. P) of the feasts of Passover (פֶּסַח) and Unleavened Bread (מַצוֹת), promoting cult centralization. In fact, Roland Levinson (1997:53–97) and many others including Roland De Vaux, have engaged in this study, and particularly insists, that, “in ancient Israel, the great annual feasts were the three feasts of pilgrimage: Unleavened Bread, Weeks and of Tests and the Feast of Passover”(1997: 487–506). These diversities of traditions affirm among other things, the multiplicity and problem of lack of scholarly consensus as to the origins and sources of the polyphonic composition of the story and theology of the Pentateuch (Boschi, 2008; Friedman, 1989; Schniedewind, 2004; Ska, 2006).





of this month each of them shall take a lamb, to a family , a lamb to a household," Exodus 12:3). Some scholars think this emphasis on the clan is as a result of the Passover's origin in the nomadic culture of the pre-settlement period (Levison, 1997: 56–58). And I want to agree that ancient Israelites' practices of which the Passover forms a part stood on ancient traditions.

These rituals are also recorded in other traditions of the Elohist and Yahwist (Exodus 23:10–19 and 34:18–26) where three pilgrimage festivals are listed. They treat the Feast of Unleavened Bread as a seven-day spring pilgrimage, when people bearing gifts, are to celebrate "before the Lord." Since the passages do not directly mention the Feast of the Passover Offering, they usually are seen as evidence of the original agricultural background of the unleavened bread festival (Baker, 758).

However, De Vaux (1997: 485) insisted that this ritual is in harmony with the brief injunction in Ezekiel 45:21–24 "on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the first month...to every ephah," and with the celebration of the Passover upon the return in Ezra 6:19–22, "the returned exile celebrated the Passover on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the first month...they joyfully celebrated the Feast of Unleavened Bread." Other information with regard to these festivals is traceable to the extra biblical document the "Passover papyrus," from the Elephantine community, colony in the upper Egypt whose temple was destroyed in 411BCE, and the Elephantine texts (419 BCE), which stresses the dates to be followed for the Passover, and the feast of the Unleavened Bread, since this prescription was new to this Jewish colony (Baker, 1992: 759; De Vaux, 1997: 485).

### The Text of the Festival in Deuteronomy 16:1–8

A comparative reading of the following legislative text of Deuteronomy 16:1–8, with other traditions/sources (J. E. P.) already discussed, indicates among other things, that, the authors of Deuteronomy added, edited, and transformed the earlier observances of the Passover and Unleavened Bread to suit their social, political and theological *Sitz im Leben*. Of course, Levinson (1997: 75–78) has already given us a detailed analysis of Deuteronomy 16:1–8; Exodus 23:15–18; 13:3–10).

The full and primary text of focus in this essay (Deuteronomy 16:1–8) reads in MT and English translations thus:

שמור את-חדש האביב ועשית פסח ליהוה אלהיך

(1a. "Observe the month of Abib and make/keep Passover to the Lord your God")

כי בחדש האביב הוציאך יהוה אלהיך ממצרים לילה

(1b. "For it was in the month of Abib that the Lord your God brought you out of Egypt")

וזבחת פסח ליהוה אלהיך צאן ובקר

(2a. "You shall offer the Passover to the Lord Your God, herd and flock")

במקום אשר-יבחר יהוה לשכן שמו שם

(2b. "In the place which the Lord has chosen to place his name")

לא-תאכל עליו חצץ

(3a. "you shall not the Unleavened, upon it")

שבעת ימי תאכל מצות לחם עני

(3b. " For seven days you shall eat the Unleavened Bread- bread of affliction/distress").

כי בחפון יצאת מארץ מצרים

(3c. " because you departed from Egypt with horrible flight")

למען תזכר את-יום צאתך מארץ מצרים כל ימי חיך



(3d. " in other that you may remember your departure from the land of Egypt all the days of your life")

ולא-יראה לך שאר בכל- גבלך שבעת ימים

(4a. " nothing leaven shall be found in your territory for seven days")

ולא-ילין מן-הבשר אשר תזבח בערב ביום הראשון לבקר

(4b. " And none of the meat of the flesh of what you slaughtered in the evening of the first day shall be left till morning")

לא תוכל לזבח הת-הפסח

(5a. "You may not be able to sacrifice the Passover")

באחד שעריך אשר-יהיה אלהיך נתן לך

(5b. " in any of the gates/settlements which the Lord your God has given you")

כי אם-אל-המקום אשר- יבחר יהוה אלהיך לשכן שמו

(6a. But only at the place which the Lord your God has chosen to dwell/establish His name')

שם חזבח את- הפסח

(6b. " Only there you shall you slaughter the Passover sacrifice")

בערב כבוא השמש מוער צאתך ממצרים

(6c. " in the evening, at sunset, the time of which you departed from Egypt")

ובשרת ואכלת במקום אשר יבחר יהוה אלהיך בו

(7a, "And you shall cook and eat in the place which the Lord your God chooses to dwell among")

ופנית בבקר והלכת לאטליך

(7b. " and in the morning you may turn and walk back to your tents/home")

ששת ימים תאכל מצות

(8a. "And for six days you shall eat Unleavened Bread")

וביום השביעי עצרת ליהוה לאלהיך

(8b. "And for seven days you shall hold a solemn assembly for the Lord your God")

לא תעשה מלאכה

(8c. "And you shall do no work at all")

In the above texts (Deuteronomy 16:1–8), De Vaux has rightly observed that verses 1, 2, 4b–7 refer to the Passover, while verses 3, 4a and 8 refer to the feast of Unleavened Bread (De Vaux, 485). Verse 1 clearly mentions the Passover which was to be celebrated in the month of Abib, but the day was not fixed. In verse 1b, it was this month that the Lord brought the Israelite out of Egypt. The MT uses the verb *יצא* which is attested *ἐξηλαθε* (aorist indicative active of *ἐλερχομαι*, meaning, "to come out") in the LXX (Exodus 34:18). From Verse 2, the language of the Passover which was originally a family-based slaughter ritual becomes a pilgrimage festival, and the sacrifices must now be performed centrally in the place the Lord your God will chose to dwell his name there. This is of course the Deuteronomistic theology of Zion/Jerusalem. This tradition off course, yields new meaning in African context where there are abuse of religions, corruption of all kinds, and proliferation of traditional African Religion shrines in the midst of Christian worship communities (Udoekpo, 2021:120–124; Udoekpo, 2020:24–38; Udoekpo, 1994:5–27). The text forbids Christians today, especially in Africa, and beyond from migrating to non-Christian worship centers, or abuse of worship and religious centers (Udoekpo, 2010:290–294; Udoekpo, 2025:210–221). Interestingly, verse 2b actually omits "your God," (*אלוהיך*) which is attested in the Samaritan Pentateuch, Targum, and in the Vulgate. The LXX attests *ο θεος σου (αυτον)*, stressing the "God of Israel."

Levinson remarks that, Deuteronomy is so thorough that both the selection of the animals and their preparation are equally now transformed (Levinson 1997:72). Unlike the earlier traditions (Yahwist), where the paschal slaughter was originally restricted to small cattle from the family



flock (Exodus 12:21), in Deuteronomy 16:2, it is standardized to herd and flock (small and large cattle), as is conventional for sacrifice (Deuteronomy 12:21; Exodus 20:24= Elohist, Leviticus 1:2; Numbers 22:40).

The victim was to be cooked, and eaten during the night, at this sanctuary in Jerusalem, in the place which the Lord has chosen to dwell his name. And in the morning, everyone was to return home (v 7). The application of the technical verb זָבַח ("sacrifice") in verses 2, 5, 6 shows the complete abrogation of the old rite and its assimilation into the public cult. It designates the sacrifice as one whose meat is eaten by the worshiper, which is to replace the original family one (Milgrom, 1991:218).

This represents a reworking of language as does the paradoxical use of the same verb to denote local secular slaughter, completely detached from any altar, in Deuteronomy 12:15, 21 (Levinson, 73; Udoekpo 2025:210–221). The authors of Deuteronomy remove the rite's original clan focus to make it instead the constitutive national holiday, which each family must observe it at the central shrine in Jerusalem. Passover, according to Levinson (74), as the holiday in which the family members were originally forbidden from leaving their residence (Exodus 12:22b), under pain of death, now becomes an observance which the citizens are forbidden to celebrate at home. (Deuteronomy 16:5–7).

Verses 3, 4a and 8 concentrate on the Unleavened Bread. Verse 3a, יִחַאֲכַל עֲלָיו חֻמֵץ (you shall not eat anything unleavened- "upon it"). Some interprets the עֲלָיו (upon it) to be referring to the Passover of verse 2. But it is not attested in the Targum. However, the *Samaritan Pentateuch* and the *Targum* actually attest the תֹּאכַל the plural instead of the second person masculine plural, attested in the *MT*. The Israelites were to eat this meal for seven days (שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תֹּאכַל) (עֲלָיו מִצּוֹת לֶחֶם עֲנִי), the meal of affliction, because they departed from Egypt with terrible flight (v 3c). They must remember this (לִמְעַן תִּזְכְּרֶנּוּ אֶת-יוֹם צֵאתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם כָּל יְמֵי חַיְיְכֶם) in verse 3d.

Verses 3cd highlight the theology of memorial that will later be seen in post-Judaism and in the NT. The tradition of the Pentateuch not only innovates and redacts the old traditions but connects the feast of Unleavened Bread (Exodus 23:15; 34:18; Deuteronomy 16:3), as well as the Passover (Deuteronomy 16:1, 6) or both (Exodus 12:23-27, 39 = Yahwistic, Exodus 12:12-13, 17= Priestly tradition, with the history of salvation- Exodus from Egypt).

Verse 5 provides the negative formulation, and arguably, the logical continuation of verse 2, while verse 6a reiterates the centralization formula which specifies the proper location of the sacrifice. Verses 6bc specifies the proper time for this sacrifice, as does 7a, stipulating the proper method of its preparation. And verse 8 reminded them that on the seventh day, no work was to be done, but only solemn assembly. But De Vaux thinks that the connection of verse 8 with the Unleavened Bread is artificial, for if the people went home on the morning (v 7b) after the Passover, they did not stay for the final assembly on the seventh day (De Vaux, 486).

Additionally, the Passover, during the reforms of King Josiah (2 Kgs 23:21–23) was celebrated according to the Deuteronomic ritual formula, and this text makes no mention of any feast of Unleavened Bread. But the uniqueness of this is highlighted in the texts that, "no Passover like this had ever been celebrated since the days of the Judges who ruled Israel, or during all the time of the Kings of Israel and Judah." Deuteronomy 16:18 reveals among other things the capacity of the authors of Deuteronomy to innovate the polyphonic and various sources that contribute to the story and theology of the Pentateuch. Thus, the people who compiled Deuteronomy were creative in some way—they did not simply copy earlier traditions, but rather adapted and reworked ideas. In biblical studies, polyphonic generally means "many voices" or "multiple perspectives."



So the text of Deuteronomy then shows us a mix of different voices and / or viewpoints, reflecting diverse traditions and / or sources.

### **Theological Relevance of Deuteronomy 16:1–8**

The relevance of the two Festivals of Passover and Unleavened bread skillfully blended in the Deuteronomy 16:1–8, cannot be over emphasized. Its relevance is perceived in the NT as well as in the various religious and Christian communities. The NT broadly speaking, refers to the two festivals, especially the Passover rite, in narrating the theology of the Last Supper (Mark 14:1–51; Matt 26:1–46; Luke 22 1–53; John 11:55; 12:1, 13:1–38) where Jesus is interpreted as the paschal lamb (Baker, 763). Furthermore, NT treats Passover as part of the Festival of Unleavened Bread (Mark 14:2, 12) or as Baker (763), rightly observes, “uses the latter term to refer to the former festival (Luke 22:1, 7; Matt 26:17; Acts 12:3–4; John 13:1, 4; 18:28).” In the Lukan infancy narrative (Luke 2:42) and in the passion narrative (Luke 22:1) mention is clearly made of Jews who would go up to Jerusalem to take part in the Passover and Unleavened Bread festivals during which they eat the meal of the sacrificial rituals in kinship groups. While these texts and its descriptions reflect the ancient Jewish rituals, they also allude to the salvific and redemptive dimension of the Passover meals.

In fact, although the synoptic gospels of Matthew 26:17–20; Mark 4:6–17 and Luke 22:7–14 indicates that Jesus ate the sacrificial meal with his disciples before his redemptive journey to the Cross, John 13, 1; 18:28 and 19:14, strike a different chronological note of the meal, prior to the feast of the Passover. John as in Letter to the Hebrews and Letters of St. Paul, saw the crucified Jesus as a sacrifice atoning for the sins of believers, though he is identified as a paschal offering (1 Corinthians 5:7-8). But the early church community read the events not necessarily to celebrate the exodus, like Deuteronomy 16:1–8, but to suit its context of the redemptive message of Jesus Crucifixion (Baker, 1992: 763). In fact, Deuteronomy 16:1–8 is not only part of the legislative texts of the Deuteronomistic Code (Deuteronomy 12:1–26: 15), but of the entire Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy – 2 Kings). It shares in its theological viewpoints of; exclusive worship of YHWH; of joy and inclusivity; fidelity to God; the theologies of the land, cult centralization in Zion/Jerusalem, name and election (Gnuse, 1997:62–128).

Fidelity to God is demonstrated in the text of Deuteronomy 16 1–8. Like Deuteronomy 12, It calls for a radical cure of apostasy which is not unconnected with YHWH alone worships. This comes with God’s blessings. As stress in Clement (1965:307–308), its promotion of cult centralization in Jerusalem underlines the theological significance which the Deuteronomists attached to the idea of YHWH’s land, Canaan, which he had given to Israel, for “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine, and you are aliens who have become my tenants” (Lev 25:23). In Deuteronomy 16:1–8 YHWH dwells amongst his people. YHWH chooses his Place to dwell his name. In the Covenant Code (Exodus 22:24), YHWH dwells in the sanctuary. But in the Deuteronomistic Code, YHWH’s name is theologically significant and sufficient (Nicholson, 1963: 380–389). Probably this led Von Rad and others to say that our text has “demythologized the ark” (Clement, 1965:301–312; Von Rad 2001:178–179). These highlights, more the theology of Davidic election, widening YHWH’s exclusive choice of a certain royal family into a choice of the cult’s site under his control (Nelson, 2004:178). Seebass (1975:82–83), has also suggested that everywhere בחר occurs (Deuteronomy 16: 6a, 7a), it involves a relationship to persons. It denotes choice out of a group to perform a function on behalf of others. Again, for Clements, supported by others, “Perhaps the most important of all the innovation introduced by Deuteronomy into Israelite theology was to use the terminology of election in defining the relationship between YHWH and his people”(Clements,1965:305; Nicholson, 56–57; von Rad, 2001:178–179).



Additionally, the theology of change, renewal, reforms, adaptation, and purification could also be perceived from Deuteronomy 16:1–8. The centralization of cult also served as a great turning point in the history of the religions in Israel, for it brought about the collapse of an entire old system and underlines the theology of the Torah-book and synagogue worship, thus purging the Israelite religion of its over-cultic elements. In other words, the non-sacrificial functions of the priesthood are greatly introduced (Whybray 1995:91–104).

In African worship, especially in my home Diocese of Ikot Ekpene, in Nigeria, Deuteronomy 16:1–8, is quite relevant. As a religious society in larger Nigerian or African context, Ikot Ekpene Diocese and others, both within and even outside Nigeria, are still plagued with multi-facet socio-political, economic and religious problems, including proliferation of shrines, competing deities, divisiveness, tribalism, poverty occasioned by effects of colonialism, global isolationism, relativism and selfishness. Central worship of God and Holy Masses in parishes all over the Diocese of Ikot Ekpene, and beyond, encouraged by this study, provides the faithful with a renewed sense of oneness, trust in divine providence, fidelity in their one and true God who is ever-present in the midst of a joyful people, despite daily challenges. It gives them a sense, hope, solidarity and synodality with one another (the poor, the rich, male, female, foreigners and their priests), irrespective of class, village and town. Deuteronomy 16:1–8 urges everyone irrespective of our worship location to choose obedience, and fellowship and thus to receive the benefits and blessings that comes from God by worshiping him in a place the Lord has chosen as his own.

## Conclusion

Despite its limited scope, this work has demonstrated the historical (P. J. E. D) origins /sources of the story and theological relevance of the Festivals of the Passover and Unleavened Bread and its redemptive implications. Laws of the Covenant Codes (Exodus 20:22 –23:33), Holiness Codes (Leviticus 17–26) and Deuteronomic Codes (12:1 –26:15) were written and re-narrated with reference to others. Deuteronomy 16:1–8 reveals not only the diversity of sources in narrating the origin of Israel and her faith, but the extraordinary skills of the story tellers or authors to innovate the stories and theologies of the Passover and Unleavened Bread, for our faith and redemption. Above all, its relevance as discussed cannot be overemphasized. The study focuses primarily on the historical and theological origins of Passover and Unleavened Bread using selected biblical texts (Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy) and this is a limitation. Possible other relevant texts such as some apocryphal writings, extra-biblical historical records, could be analysed, which may well provide additional context or challenge interpretations presented in this work. A possible suggestions for future research is that the Passover and Unleavened Bread could be compared with some neighbouring Ancient Near Eastern festivals to better comprehend shared cultural, ritualistic, or even theological elements.

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