

# ISRAEL'S NEW YEAR

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In our time, it is customary for people to “ring in the New Year” with a celebration, typically with fireworks. Many individuals also make “New Year’s Resolutions” about certain things they recognize need to change in their lives. In fact, many of those people likely began the year with activities they should have resolved not to participate in *before* New Year’s Day! But in the Old Testament, God gave the Israelites a commandment concerning when their new year would begin, and this was centered in the promises God fulfilled in giving birth to them as a nation. Exodus 12:1-2 says, “And the Lord spake unto Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, *This month shall be unto you the beginning of months: it shall be the first month of the year to you.*”

## **God’s promises to Abraham**

To understand why God began Israel’s calendar at that particular time, it is necessary to go back four centuries in time to be reminded of the promises that He gave to Abram. God promised Abram that “he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir” (Gen 15:4). This was not a promise limited to having one descendant. Genesis 15:5-6 says, “And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness.” Thus, God promised to make a great nation of Abraham’s descendants.

Furthermore, the Lord promised that the land of Canaan would be given to them: “And he said unto him, I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it” (Gen 15:7; see also verses 18-21). But all of this would be fulfilled over the course of time. Genesis 15:12-16 says, “And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him. And he said unto Abram, *Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; and also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance.* And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.” Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot twelve sons. They came to Egypt, 70 souls in all, to sojourn during the days of famine (Exod 1:1-5). The Israelites multiplied in Egypt and the Egyptians made them their slaves, and “they made their lives bitter with hard bondage, in mortar, and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field: all their service, wherein they made them serve, was with rigor” (Exod 1:6-14). Thus, by the time of Moses, God was ready to judge Egypt, bring Israel out of their bondage with great substance, and then give them the land of Canaan for their inheritance. God appeared to Moses out of a burning bush in Horeb and promised to do exactly that (Exod 3:1-22).

## **The Passover and the Exodus**

God brought judgment on Egypt with nine terrible plagues, but Pharaoh’s heart was

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(continued)

hardened and he still would not let the Israelites go. “And the Lord said unto Moses, Yet will I bring one plague more upon Pharaoh, and upon Egypt; afterwards he will let you go hence: when he shall let you go, he shall surely thrust you out hence altogether. Speak now in the ears of the people, and let every man borrow of his neighbor, and every woman of her neighbor, jewels of silver, and jewels of gold. And the Lord gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians. Moreover the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh's servants, and in the sight of the people. And Moses said, Thus saith the Lord, About midnight will I go out into the midst of Egypt: and all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sitteth upon his throne, even unto the firstborn of the maidservant that is behind the mill; and all the firstborn of beasts. And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there was none like it, nor shall be like it any more. But against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue, against man or beast: *that ye may know how that the Lord doth put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel*” (Exod 11:1-7). It was at this moment that God commanded Israel to begin their year with that month, and to observe the Passover (Exod 12:1-2ff). “And it came to pass, that at midnight the Lord smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sat on his throne unto the firstborn of the captive that was in the dungeon; and all the firstborn of cattle” (Exod 12:29). The houses of the Israelites were “passed over” and none of their firstborn died. The Egyptians then sent them out in haste, and lent to them “jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment: and the Lord gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they lent unto them such things as they required. And they spoiled the Egyptians” (Exod 12:35-36).

## **The Memorial**

Exodus 12:40-42 says, “Now the sojourning of the children of Israel, who dwelt in Egypt, was four hundred and thirty years. And it came to pass at the end of the four hundred and thirty years, even the selfsame day it came to pass, that all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt. It is a night to be much observed unto the Lord for bringing them out from the land of Egypt: this is that night of the Lord to be observed of all the children of Israel in their generations.” This fit the timeframe that God had foretold to Abraham in Genesis chapter 15. Before the plagues began, Pharaoh had boasted, “Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord, neither will I let Israel go” (Exod 5:2). He found out who Jehovah was, and did indeed obey His voice to let Israel go! This was Israel's beginning as its own independent nation, and why each new year for them started with a memorial to these events (Exod 12:1-2,11-19,25-27). We have no such occasion to observe as Christians. But we are reminded by these things so that we can be “*followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises*” (Heb 6:12).