

Book of Exodus, Session 4
The Passover
Exodus 12–13

The plagues narrative comes to its climax in Exodus 11–13 with the final plague, the death of the Egyptian first-born, and with the subsequent departure of the Israelites from Egypt. The bulk of these chapters are taken up with the detailed instructions for the Passover festival, the first festival legislated in the Pentateuch and still among the most important holidays in the Jewish calendar.

Again we have to reckon with multiple accounts of these final moments for the Israelites in Egypt. And again, neither J nor P tells the complete narrative as we have come to know it. The J narrative has Moses tell Pharaoh, as usual, that the plague is coming: “Thus says the Lord: Toward midnight I will go forth among the Egyptians, and every first-born in the land of Egypt shall die” (Exod 11:4–5). But Moses also announces, in advance, that the Israelites will be unaffected: “Not a dog shall snarl at any of the Israelites, at man or beast, in order that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel” (11:7). In J, therefore, there is no need for the famous blood on the lintel to distinguish the Israelites from the Egyptians: God is capable of distinguishing them without such a sign. This is largely because according to J the Israelites live separately from the Egyptians: the Israelites reside in the distinct territory of Goshen, as they have since the time of Joseph.

The death of the first-born

After the plague, Moses tells Pharaoh, all of Egypt will demand that we leave. And so it comes to pass: in the middle of that night God strikes the first-born of Egypt, and Pharaoh and his people urge the Israelites to leave at once. Finally given the opportunity they had been waiting for since the beginning of the plagues narrative, the Israelites gather all of their

possessions hurriedly, including their unleavened dough. They escape under the cover of night, in case Pharaoh might change his mind as he had done so many times before.

In the P story, again as usual, there is no advance warning of the death of the first-born for Pharaoh or the Egyptians. Rather, God tells Moses and Aaron to instruct the Israelites to slaughter a lamb and put its blood on the lintels of their houses so that when God goes through Egypt he knows which houses are Israelite and which are Egyptian. This conforms to P's notion of where the Israelites live: according to P, they do not live apart from the Egyptians, but rather intermingled with them. The Israelites do just as God commands them, and once God has laid this final punishment upon the Egyptians, the Israelites depart.

For many readers, the death of the first-born is a difficult climax to the plagues story. Whether Pharaoh was stubborn or had no free will, whether it is presented as necessary for the release of Israel or not, this plague inevitably entails the deaths of the innocent, particularly of innocent children. For those readers who have suffered the loss of a child, it is nearly impossible to celebrate this as a moment of triumph. Rarely does God's work on behalf of the Israelites create such a moral conundrum—though we may also point to the divine command to Joshua to slaughter every man, woman, child, and animal during the conquest of Canaan. Today we have a sense of children as inherently innocent; it is unclear, however, whether such a notion was present in ancient Israel, or, to put it differently, whether this is a concept that the God of the Hebrew Bible ever takes into consideration. Isaac, Jephthah's daughter, the generation of the Flood—there are plenty of examples. Perhaps the best we can say is that this is indeed a moment of sadness: sadness that the evil of the Egyptians was such that this plague was the only way to make Pharaoh and his people understand what they had done, and to let Israel go. It is a cold comfort.

The Passover

As we turn to the Passover proper, a brief word is needed about the term “Passover” itself. This is the common translation of the Hebrew word *pesakh*, which is both the name of the festival and, as in English, the word for what God does with regard to the Israelites. Yet it is basically agreed in scholarship that the word does not mean “pass over,” as it appears in virtually all translations. It means, rather “protect”: “when I see the blood I will protect you so that no plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt” (Exod 12:13).

Now to the festival itself. There are in fact three distinct elements at play in Exodus 12, where the Passover festival is introduced and described, though all of them come from the same priestly school (if not the same priestly hand). The first is the set of instructions for the Israelites at this particular historical moment, in the land of Egypt: in other words, the first Passover, described in Exod 12:1–13, 21–23. Within the context of the narrative, these instructions are the only thing that is really important. This is what the Israelites must do in order to avoid having their first-born die along with those of the Egyptians: slaughter a lamb and eat it, along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. This part of God’s speech does not mention any future recurrence of such a meal; it is purely focused on the narrative present.

The second element here is, naturally enough, the broadening of this historical event to a regular part of the Israelite festival calendar. This occurs later in the chapter, in Exod 12:24–27 and 42–49: “You shall observe this as an institution for all time, for you and your descendants” (12:24). In these verses we are told that the practice of slaughtering and eating the lamb will occur annually, on this same day, and we learn who may and must and must not eat it, be it a native Israelite or a resident alien or a slave or a hired laborer. Included in this section is the

famous injunction to explain this ritual to one's children: "When your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this rite?' you shall say, 'It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, because he protected the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians but saved our houses'" (12:26–27). This statement, and its parallels elsewhere in Exodus and Deuteronomy, form the primary motivation for the Jewish custom of telling the Exodus story every year on Passover. It is also a reminder that it is through telling a story, rather than through proving historical veracity somehow, that meaning and values are to be communicated.

Unleavened Bread

The third element of Exodus 12 is one that seemingly has little connection to the narrative, but which we cannot today consider Passover without: the week of eating only unleavened bread. This feature is mentioned exclusively in (Exod 12:114–20); nowhere else in the chapter is it suggested that the Israelites cannot eat leaven for a week after the celebration of the Passover night. And, conversely and strikingly, nowhere in the verses that give instructions regarding unleavened bread is there any mention of the Passover event, sacrifice, or celebration. Indeed, what is described here seems to be an entirely separate festival, one that is called the "Feast of Unleavened Bread"—a name that appears, independently of any mention of Passover, also in the brief festival calendars in Exod 23:15 and 34:18. This festival lasts seven days, with the first and last being particularly sacred.

The relationship of Passover—a single night, and a sacrifice—to the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which lasts for a week and entails mostly a dietary restriction, is not entirely obvious. It is clear, even from Exodus 12 alone, that they were originally separate religious celebrations. The Feast of Unleavened Bread appears in lists of older agricultural festivals (along with Sukkot,

“Booths,” and Shavuot, “Weeks,” the fall and spring harvest festivals, respectively), and it is generally understood that it too was originally tied to the agricultural calendar, and was unrelated to the historical narrative of the exodus from Egypt. Along with the festivals of Sukkot and Shavuot, the Feast of Unleavened Bread was a pilgrimage festival, in which the Israelites were expected to go to the sanctuary to offer sacrifices and celebrate as a community.

In contrast, the Passover sacrifice does not appear in any of the oldest lists of Israelite festivals, and certainly not pilgrimage festivals. It is unclear whether it too has an origin independent of the exodus narrative—if so, we cannot reconstruct what its original function may have been, though given the title, properly “protection,” we might surmise that it had to do with an annual request for God to keep watch over his people. But we know it exclusively as tied to the departure from Egypt, celebrating that historical moment in Israel’s past.

The combination of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread happens here in Exodus 12 and also, separately, in Deuteronomy 16, and it is safe to say that neither is prescribing the combination for the first time, but that both are rather reflecting a combination that was effected in the Israelite community in practice. This sort of conflation of seasonal and historical celebrations, and more specifically the shift from season to historical celebrations, is a common feature of religious events, in both Judaism and Christianity. The festival of Shavuot, originally the spring harvest, came in Judaism to celebrate the giving of the law at Sinai; the festival of Sukkot, originally the fall harvest, came to be associated with the journey through the wilderness. Christmas, of course, combines the birth of Jesus with the winter solstice. And so on. In practice, then, the one-night celebration of Passover, recalling that one night in Egypt, is aligned with the first day of the week-long Feast of Unleavened Bread, giving us the week-long Passover that is still celebrated to this day.

Despoiling the Egyptians

Among the deaths of the first-born and the instructions for the Passover and Feast of Unleavened bread are two brief references to a seemingly odd aspect of the narrative. Before the final plague, God tells Moses to instruct the people to borrow some silver and gold from their Egyptian neighbors (Exod 11:2–3). And, we are told, the people did so (12:35–36). How does this stripping of the Egyptians fit into the rest of the narrative? In the J story, the Israelites and the Egyptians aren't neighbors; they live apart and have no contact with each other, especially during the plagues cycle. In the P story, there is no interaction between the Israelites and the Egyptians, nor even between Moses and Pharaoh. What we have here, then, is part of the E story, which has been largely silent during the preceding few chapters. But this taking of gold and silver from the Egyptians is an important element in the larger E narrative; for it is from these precious metals that the Israelites will go on to create the calf in Exodus 32, a story that occurs only in E.

A mixed multitude

Near the end of Exodus 12, as the text relates the actual departure from Egypt, we are told that the Israelites number around six hundred thousand men, not counting children, a number which is usually extrapolated to about two million people total (including both women and children). We are also told that a “mixed multitude” went up with them. The precise meaning of this phrase is disputed, though groups of non-Israelites who were also under Egyptian bondage may well be intended. What might underlie this enigmatic phrase is the historical recognition that ancient Israel was not an ethnically monolithic society. Rather, it was a

patchwork of various peoples, some inhabiting their own isolated territories within Israel, some intermingled with the Israelites. In the historical memory of Israel, it had always been thus; and so if Israelite history was to be traced back to the entire nation emerging from Egypt, it would make sense for them to imagine that the ethnic diversity they saw around them would have also originated from there.

The death of the first-born and the departure from Egypt appear to be the high point of the plot: finally the enslavement that sparked the narrative back in Exodus 1 has ended, and the Israelites are on their way to the promised land, led by their God. Yet there is much more to come: the exodus is not truly underway until the Israelites have escaped from the Egyptians one final time, at the sea in Exodus 14–15; and the Israelites have not established their true relationship with God until the theophany and law-giving at Sinai. The Passover is a central historical moment, but it is not the end of the story.

Christian tradition

The Passover takes on new significance in Christian tradition, because of its association with the death of Jesus. The Last Supper of Jesus was a Passover meal, on the night before he died, and his death was interpreted as the counterpart of the sacrifice of the paschal lamb.

Questions for reflection:

1. How do we deal with the morality of God killing all the Egyptian first-born?
2. What is the relationship of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread?
3. How does the text transform a one-time event into an annual occurrence?
4. What is the importance of the repeated instruction to tell the Exodus story to one's children?

Recommended reading:

Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus," 774-84.

Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 178-214.

Further reading:

B. Bokser, *The Origin of the Seder* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1984)

A. J. Saldarini, *Jesus and Passover* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist, 1984).