

4) EXODUS 11-13:16 - FREE AT LAST

The narrative of the Passover is a central story in the Old Testament.

- Jews derive great inspiration from it.
- Christians found in it a way to understand the death of Jesus.

The Structure:

11 - prelude to chapter 12

12: 1-20 God addresses Moses and Aaron about the details of the observance of the first Passover.

12: 21-28 In response, Moses conveys the instructions to the people.

12: 29-39 All the first-born in Egypt are killed and this is interpreted as God's doing. In response, the Egyptians not only permit the Israelites to go, they compel them to do so.

12: 40-51 Concluding summary.

13:1-10 Festival of unleavened bread (following 12:14-20)

13: 11-16 Consecration of first-born to God.

1) Prelude to Passover - 11

Up to this point, the Egyptians have suffered 9 plagues, and even though Pharaoh's position has softened, he has yet to consent to Israelite freedom. This is about to change. The purpose of the plagues has been to punish Pharaoh for his obstinate refusal to let God's people go. Until now, the plagues have obviously not touched Pharaoh personally enough. This too is about to change.

11: 4-8 God tells people through Moses that God will kill the first-born of every Egyptian from the greatest to the least, even of the livestock. But the Israelites will be safe, so safe, in fact, that not even a dog will growl at them.

2) The Passover Instituted - 12: 1-20

1-13 - God tells the people the exact way the Passover Lamb is to be sacrificed. The rationale for many of the details has to do with hastiness of departure. Another set of details has to do with remaining safe during the killing of the first-born in Egypt.

14-20 - The narrative shifts from the present to the future and describes how the Passover is to be celebrated by future generations. The day is established (14th day of that month - Nisan). At this point there is no mention of the Passover lamb, but rather, the introduction of unleavened bread as a central symbol of the celebrations. Again, unleavened bread has to do with a hasty departure (no time to leaven).

Scholars suggest that there is a fusion of two separate festivals into one at this point. One has to do with the sacrifice of a lamb (festival of nomadic herders like Moses in Midian), and another having to do with agriculture tied to the spring harvest. In Leviticus 23 (and also Exodus 13:11-16) a third element is added to the unblemished lamb and

unleavened bread - the offering of the first fruits of the harvest.

3) Moses conveys instructions to people - 12:21-28

In Moses' retelling of God's instructions, the emphasis falls on the sprinkled blood as a signal to God that an Israelite occupies the house (blood sprinkled on door-posts). Obviously, the safety of the people was of first importance before the festival was actually established.

4) The killing of the First-born - 12: 29-39

God is as good as God's word. Every Egyptian home suffers what was predicted while the Israelites remain safe. Pharaoh and the Egyptians fall to their knees and plead with the Israelites to leave. After relieving the Egyptians of some of their valuables, the Israelites depart for the wilderness. The numbers are astounding - 600,000 men plus an indeterminate number of others. Counting women and children we are looking at over 1,000,000 people!

5) Summary comments - 12: 40-51

- Chronological statement - Israel had been in Egypt 430 years.
- 40-42 - Another reminder of perpetual celebration of Passover.
- 43-50 - Emphasis on persons eligible to participate.

6) The 3rd element in Passover celebration - 13: 1-16

The consecration of the first born to the Lord has to do with agricultural sacrifices as thank-offerings to God. Although the unleavened bread is mentioned again (since it too has to do with agriculture) the emphasis is on sacrifice of first-fruits including animals. But human beings and donkeys are exempt (redeemed) by replacement with another animal.

7) General Questions and Comments

A) There is general consensus among scholars that Chapter 12 has probably had a liturgical function in the worship of Israel from day one. What this means is that the story of Passover is not just a history of its origins, but also something that was read out as the festival was celebrated every year afterwards. This also means that past and present are fused in the very narrative itself (Moses moves from present to future tense throughout). Another clue is that the population numbers indicated are probably those during Solomon's reign when a census was taken (for tax purposes).

B) Although the emphasis in Chap 12 and in modern day Jewish practice is to center Passover celebrations in the home, in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, the Passover was centered in the Temple and organized by the King and high Priests in a very centralized manner.

C) The meaning of Passover is about God's miraculous salvation and thus it has perpetual significance (the way the gospel narrative about Jesus death and resurrection has for Christians). In remembering and repeating the story, it takes on contemporary significance in terms of life lived today and God's saving and liberating presence in it.

D) Problems with Passover Story

- The plundering of the Egyptians (their Jewelry, etc).
- The killing of the first-born by God.

Even though it makes it seem like Israelites were getting payback, the story also suggests that the Egyptians gave them stuff willingly. Was it fear or guilt that motivated them? Was it admiration and respect for Hebrew tenacity and determination to be free?

Even though God's killing of the first-born may make God seem no better than Pharaoh or Herod, God's motivation was the liberation of an oppressed people not the tyrannical control and protection of an oppressive power. On the other hand, even though a people long oppressed may feel God's actions, however gruesome, serve their vindication and freedom, we cannot finally square this image of God with that of the Abba of Jesus in the gospels who makes the rain fall and the sun shine on good and bad alike, and who counsels loving forgiveness of enemies, not revenge.

The problem of evil in the Old Testament - Evil is not abstracted into Satan or conflicting tendencies within human beings leading to it. Rather, good and evil are associated with people. There are good people and bad people and God must reward good and punish evil, otherwise God would not be just. In the New Testament, however, God deals with evil by taking it on and absorbing it (forgiveness rather than revenge and the effort for reconciliation rather than punishment as the final path to justice). Rather than destroy people possessed by evil, God as Jesus reveals and embodies God seeks to penetrate human hearts and spirits so as to defeat evil from within. The true enemy is sin and sin needs to be defeated not by destroying the sinner but by healing individuals from the influence of sin in their lives.

E) This brings us to the meaning of the Passover for early Christians.

- For Matthew, Mark, and Luke - the Last Supper is a Passover meal
- For John - Jesus' role is to become the Passover Lamb.

Thus, early Christians identified the Passover lamb with the death of Jesus.

Mark 8: 27-33 - Messiah's role involves suffering and this is a surprising element for most Jews of the time and their popular expectations of their Messiah. The Passover lamb is one way early Christians began to understand the role of Christ as a sacrifice to liberate his people in bondage to the real enemy - sin. Rather than adding to sin by

killing infant children, in Jesus, God is absorbing the sin of violent hate and responding with an open hand of forgiveness. God is in solidarity with the oppressed, but does not avenge them by destroying their enemies. Love must find another way toward justice and healing, so that a door is opened even to enemies.

1 Corinthians 5: 7-8 - Paul writes about the saving significance of Christ's death with the Jewish Passover in mind. Not only is the death of Christ equated with the death of Passover lamb, but the church is identified as the Spiritual Israel. As such it rejects the "leaven" of sin and embraces the "unleavened bread" of faithfulness to God.

1 Peter 1: 17-21 - Even though Christians continue to live "in exile" (in a cruel and sinful world) they should know that they have already been ransomed or redeemed. How? Not by the usual means of ransom (silver or gold), but by the "precious blood of Christ, like a lamb without blemish or defect (sinless/pure/innocent)". Jesus is pure because he is pure love, untainted by sin (sin is = all that is anti-love-motivated thought and action).

We will discuss the significance of blood and sacrifice and how the gospel of Jesus reframes the Passover with a more expansive and inclusive kind of love.