

Passover 2005
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Overview

The institution of the Passover is recorded in Exodus 12. The children of Israel are slaves in Egypt. God has brought nine plagues on the Egyptians to motivate them to release Israel, and they have refused. Now he is about to bring a tenth plague, the death of all the firstborn in Egypt.

In the previous plagues, Israel either suffered along with the Egyptians, or was spared without any special action on their part.

- Fourth plague, flies, 8:22
- Fifth plague, murrain, 9:4
- Sixth plague, boils, 9:11 (distinguishing Moses and Aaron from the Egyptians)
- Seventh plague, hail, 9:26 (could also be avoided by bringing animals inside, v.19)
- Ninth plague, darkness, 10:23

The tenth plague is too terrible to allow Israel to experience it, but neither will they be spared passively. God prescribes specific steps that they are to take, both to escape this plague and to remember its significance in their national history.

The account takes the form of a double execution paragraph. An execution paragraph consists of the account of a command being given, followed by the account of the obedience to that command. Scripture often delights to record both the command and the obedience in corresponding detail. Examples include Noah's construction of the ark, Abraham's journey to Mount Moriah to sacrifice Isaac, and the construction of the tabernacle.

Here we have two such cycles.

- 3-20, God commands Moses and Aaron to command the nation to keep the passover.
- 21-27a, Moses and Aaron obey the Lord, and deliver the command to the people.
- 27b-28, the people obey. This panel offers only a summary, without the details.

Today, we focus on the first cycle, which is the one with the most detailed correspondences. After a chronological prologue (vv. 1-2), the instructions that the Lord gave Moses and Aaron, and that they gave to the people, fall into three sequential sections:

- Preparation for the coming judgment
- What to expect during the judgment
- Institution of an ongoing memorial to this event

The table (handout) shows the correspondences.

1-2, Prologue

In the middle east, agriculturally, the year begins in the fall, when the final harvest has come in, the early rains soften the ground, and the new cycle of planting can begin. Cf. Exod 23:16. The winter there is not harsh and unproductive as it is here, and thus spring is not a natural time of beginning as it is in Europe.

Thus the command to begin the year in the spring is specifically to commemorate the birth of the nation. This, like so many of their other laws, will set them apart from other nations and mark them as a “peculiar people.”

3-11, 21-22, Preparation

Notice the *participants*, the *purity*, the *painting*, and the *posture*.

2-4, The Participants.—Andrea’s mother found that a year-old lamb (v.5; actually, a sheep) can weigh 100 pounds or more. This, and the requirement that nothing be left until the morning (v.10), is the basis for the requirement that people carefully assess the number of people in the family, and invite the neighbors in “if the household be too little for the lamb” (v.4). This requirement led them to recognize that they were part of a community. Similarly, though the family is the nucleus of the church, it is well that we join together for our worship.

5-6, The Purity.—The sheep was selected and then kept for four days before being slaughtered. This time ensured that no blemishes had been overlooked. It was not selected on a cursory basis, but was carefully examined.

7, 22a, The Painting.—The blood was to be applied all around the doorway. The exception of the threshold was perhaps to avoid treading on it and thus dishonoring it.

11, 22b, The Posture.—Two details are important here.

First (11), they are to be dressed for travel, in expectation of the Lord’s deliverance.

Second (22), they dare not set foot outside the house.

12-13, 23, Judgment

This verse gives the reason for painting the doorway with the blood and for not stepping out of doors. Understanding what is going on requires us to distinguish carefully between “pass through” and “pass over.”

The Lord will pass through.—This is a fine translation of this particular Hebrew phrase, (*abar be-*. He will go through all the land.

to smite the Egyptians.—v.23 makes it clear that he is not personally doing the destroying, but is accompanied by “the destroyer.” Compare 2 Sam 24:16, the plague on Jerusalem, where this being is identified as an angel.

When I see the blood.—Here we see the purpose for the painted doorways. It marks the houses of those who heard and obeyed God’s instructions.

I will pass over you.—This translation is unfortunate. It gives the impression that God simply passes by these houses. But the verb *pasax* is completely different from that translated “pass through” at the beginning. Of its four occurrences elsewhere in the OT, that in Isa 31:5 is most

helpful for understanding the present text. The context is the Assyrian invasion of Judah, and the promise that God will “come down to fight for mount Zion, and for the hill thereof” (v. 4). The four clauses of v.5 are arranged chiastically.

- A. As birds flying,
- B. so will the LORD of hosts defend Jerusalem;
- B'. defending also he will deliver *it*;
- A'. *and* passing over he will preserve it.

“Defend” in B and B’ means to fence in, to cover over, to shield. God does this “as birds flying,” which is best understood not as traversing the heaven, but as hovering over their nest to protect it. “Pass over” in B’ will have the same meaning, and is better rendered “hover over.” Compare the action of God’s Spirit in Gen 1:2, and the explicit comparison of him with a bird protecting her nest with her wings:

- Deut 32:11, As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings:
- Psa 17:8, hide me under the shadow of thy wings,
- Psa 57:1, Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul trusteth in thee: yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge, until *these* calamities be overpast.
- Psa 61:4, I will abide in thy tabernacle for ever: I will trust in the covert of thy wings.
- Psa 91:4 He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth *shall be thy* shield and buckler.

So in Exodus, the point is not that God as destroyer passes by the houses of the Israelites, but that God hovers over the marked houses, protecting them from the destroying angel, just as in Isa 31:5 he protected Jerusalem from the Assyrian invader.

The critical point here is that Israel does not escape the destroyer because they are more righteous than the Egyptians, but because they are protected by the blood of the lamb.

14-20, 24-27, Commemoration

Titles.—The Lord commands the nation to commemorate the event annually. It is described as

- a *memorial*, recalling the historic event;
- a *feast*, specifically a pilgrimage feast, which requires the people to gather together in the place that the Lord will choose, emphasizing its national character;
- an *ordinance*, enjoined by their law and not optional;
- a *service* of worship, by which they give thanks to God.

Exclusion of Leaven.—A characteristic of the feast is the exclusion of leaven. Historically, this commemorated an incidental detail of their departure, noted in v.34. In making leavened bread, one must knead the dough and leave it to rise, and there was a special vessel used for this purpose. They had already packed these up in preparation for their departure.

Why focus on this element in the feast?

- Paul in 1 Cor 5:6-8 uses leaven as an emblem of impurity in the church, and illustrates how the church should purge itself from the lack of leaven in the Passover. But this is an illustration drawing from the historical statement, and does not explain why God commanded this element of the ceremony in the first place.
- I prefer to think that the exclusion of leaven was to force the Jews to interact with their Gentile neighbors and tell them the story of God's judgment of sin and his protection through the lamb. Their leaven was not a separate ingredient that they mixed into their bread, but intrinsic to the dough, what we would call sourdough. If you lose your starter, you have to go borrow some from someone else. By excluding leaven from their houses from seven days, God ensures that they will have to go to their Gentile neighbors, giving them an opportunity to tell them the passover story.

26, 27, The Children's Question.—Moses anticipates that their children will ask the reason for this celebration. The answer he provides emphasizes God's judgment on the sinful Egyptians and his deliverance of the Israelites.

Interestingly, to this day an important part of the Jewish Passover seder is the moment when the youngest child asks the father a series of four questions. These questions are:

- Why is it that on all other nights during the year we eat either bread or matzoh, but on this night we eat only matzoh?
- Why is it that on all other nights we eat all kinds of herbs, but on this night we eat only bitter herbs?
- Why is it that on all other nights we do not dip our herbs even once, but on this night we dip them twice (once into a mixture of chopped apples and nuts, and once into salt water)?
- Why is it that on all other nights we eat either sitting or reclining, but on this night we eat in a reclining position?

It is important that they communicate these details of the feast from generation to generation. Involving the children reflects Moses' insistence to Pharaoh that the children accompany the nation to worship (10:9). Unfortunately, they do not perpetuate the question that Moses anticipates, the one concerning the destroyer and God's deliverance through a blood sacrifice.

NT Parallel

The imagery of the passover is central in defining our Lord's role. The NT describes him in terms of two roles in the passover.

First, he is the passover lamb.

- Paul makes this explicit in 1 Cor 5:7, "Christ our passover is sacrificed for us."
- The Lord made this point by using a passover meal as the foundation for the supper that commemorates his death for his people.
- In John's chronology, he is slain at the same time as the passover lambs in the temple.

The Israelites had to take refuge behind the blood to enjoy God's protection. Similarly, we must repent of our sin and receive the Lord Jesus if we are to enjoy the protection he offers from God's judgment.

Second, he is the one who hovers over his people to protect them from God's judgment, Matt 23:37. In this role, he continues to protect us in defending us against Satan's accusations, Heb 7:25.

Thus he is at once the *basis* and the *agent* of our defense.