



Exposition

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The Exodus

A commentary on Exodus 1–15

G. The final plague and the Passover (Exodus 11–13)

Part 4: Further legislation—Exodus 12:43–13:16 (ii)

Mark Vincent

The format of the commentary

The narrative has been broken down into several **major sections**, of a chapter or two each; some of these will be covered in one month, others will take longer. An **Introduction** is provided for each of these major sections, which sets out the major events and themes dealt with in those chapters.

Each major section is broken into **sub-sections** or **episodes** (these are typically between five and twenty verses each). For each the **AV text** is followed by a **Comment**, which draws out the major lessons and items of interest from the text. The AV text also contains **Footnotes**, in which additional 'one-off' points are made for those wanting to work through Exodus more slowly.

THIS CONCLUDES the section dealing with a second set of ordinances forming a parallel with 12:1-18, focusing particularly on the ongoing celebration of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread through the generations when Israel is in the land. It also deals with the redemption of the first-born.

Moses addresses Israel

13:3 And Moses said unto the people, Remember this day, in which ye came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand¹ the LORD brought you out from this place: there shall no leavened bread be eaten.

13:4 This day came ye out in the month Abib.
13:5 And it shall be when the LORD shall bring thee into the land of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which He sware unto thy fathers to give thee, a land flowing with milk and honey, that thou shalt keep this service² in this month.
13:6 Seven days thou shalt eat unleavened bread, and in the seventh day shall be a feast to the LORD.
13:7 Unleavened bread shall be eaten seven days; and there shall no leavened bread be seen with thee, neither shall there be leaven seen with thee in all thy quarters.
13:8 And thou shalt shew thy son in that day, saying, This is done because of that which the LORD did unto me when I came forth out of Egypt.
13:9 And it shall be for a sign³ unto thee upon thine hand, and for a memorial⁴ between thine eyes, that the LORD'S law may be in thy mouth: for with a strong hand hath the LORD brought thee out of Egypt.
13:10 Thou shalt therefore keep this ordinance in his season from year to year.
13:11 And it shall be when the LORD shall bring thee into the land of the Canaanites, as He sware unto thee and to thy fathers, and shall give it thee,
13:12 That thou shalt set apart⁵ unto the LORD all that openeth the matrix,⁶ and every firstling that cometh of a beast which thou hast; the males shall be the LORD'S.
13:13 And every firstling of an ass thou shalt redeem with a lamb; and if thou wilt not redeem it, then thou shalt break his neck:

and all the firstborn of man among thy children shalt thou redeem.

13:14 And it shall be when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, What is this? that thou shalt say unto him, By strength of hand the LORD brought us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage:

13:15 And it came to pass, when Pharaoh would hardly⁷ let us go, that the LORD slew all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man, and the firstborn of beast: therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all that openeth the matrix, being males; but all the firstborn of my children I redeem.

13:16 And it shall be for a token⁸ upon thine hand, and for frontlets⁹ between thine eyes: for by strength of hand the LORD brought us forth out of Egypt.

Comment

Moses' address begins with an injunction that Israel should remember this their day of deliverance by God's strong hand, but passes swiftly to two highly structured pieces, the first dealing with the Feast of Unleavened Bread (vv. 5-10), the second with the sanctification and redemption of the firstborn (vv. 11-16). These two sections have three common elements:

- 1 A statement as to what Israel must do when God brings them into the land of the Canaanites, which He swore to give them (vv. 5,11);
- 2 An instruction as to what a father must tell his son when asked the reason for their practices, and a command to associate this with deliverance from Egypt (vv. 8,14);
- 3 A conclusion that the ritual is to be a sign upon the hand and frontlets between the eyes, because the Lord brought them out with a strong hand (vv. 9,16).

The repetition in these two portions is unmistakable and helps to draw attention to the two pieces of ritual. The formulaic nature of the language would have aided the Israelites in memorising both what they had to do and the reason why.

The second of the three points above, the command to instruct one's son, is of particular interest. There are, in fact, four such passages in the Scriptures connected with the Passover, three in Exodus and one in Deuteronomy. It is worth quoting each one:

- "And when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, What mean the testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments, which the

LORD our God hath commanded you? then thou shalt say unto thy son, We were Pharaoh's bondmen in Egypt; and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand" (Deut. 6:20,21)

- "And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service [= what is this service to you]? that ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the LORD'S passover, Who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt" (Ex. 12:26,27)
- "And it shall be when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, What is this? that thou shalt say unto him, By strength of hand the LORD brought us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage" (13:14)
- "And thou shalt shew thy son in that day, saying, This is done because of that which the LORD did unto me when I came forth out of Egypt" (v. 8).

There is a wonderful piece of traditional Jewish exegesis associated with this fourfold theme. Why was the command given on four occasions? The suggested answer is that they refer to four different kinds of son, each of which must be instructed in God's ways in a manner appropriate to him. The difference between the types of sons can be seen in the questions they ask their fathers. Of the four passages set out above, the first son asks, "What mean the testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments . . . ?". He is a clever son, articulate and inquisitive. The second son is a 'wicked' son, because he excludes himself from the children of Israel as he asks, perhaps more belligerently, "What is this service to you?". The third son is more basic and direct in his questioning. He is a 'simple' son, and merely asks, "What is this?". Yet he too receives his answer. Notice that the final son does not ask anything at all. He might be characterised as the foolish son, too dense to notice that anything remarkable is taking place, let alone to ask what its significance might be! Or perhaps he simply does not yet know enough to ask. Yet this does not mean the father is excused from offering an explanation. This son too must be shown and taught the good traditions and wonderful action in history that God has brought into human life. Even if the son does not bother to ask, he must still be shown the ways of God.

What the father must say to the fourth son is instructive: "This is done because of that which the LORD did unto *me* when *I* came forth out of Egypt". The message is made personal—it is not

even 'to us' in some collective sense, but 'to me' ('your own Dad!')—and by this personal dimension the message is rendered more powerful. God has spared us and raised us to great things as individuals, and, whilst we would want to avoid the indulgence and sentimentality of excessive personal 'testimony', speaking of the power of God's salvation in our own personal life and experience is something which is to be encouraged rather than repressed.

Turning now to the two pieces of ritual dealt with in our passage, the block of verses on the Feast of Unleavened Bread does not appear to add any new content to what was previously disclosed in chapter 12, but serves instead as a reminder of the continuing obligation of the Israelites to keep the feast now that deliverance has been achieved. The second block, on the redemption of the first-born, does add new material, however, and must be examined in greater detail.

First, we discover that it is first-born *males* that are to be the Lord's (v. 12), whereas there had been no prescription of gender in verse 2. Next, we discover that the ass is a special case, and must be redeemed with a lamb rather than being sacrificed. If the owner is not willing to redeem the ass, its neck must be broken. Finally, first-born male children must be redeemed.

Redemption had not been mentioned in verse 12; there, only the concept of sanctifying the first-born had been introduced. Redemption involves a buying back and a setting free, a liberating of the thing redeemed. The first-born is God's, and by implication must be totally given and dedicated to Him. In the ultimate sense, this could only be done through sacrifice (as was the case for the Egyptian first-born), and the implicit teaching of this passage is that first-borns must be sacrificed to the Lord, as was the case for the animals.

There were to be two exceptions to this. Taking the man first, human sacrifice was not what God required from Israel; and in any case, Egypt had been 'given' for the 'ransom' of Israel as God's first-born (Isa. 43:3). For this reason, the first-born males had to be redeemed. More detail is given on this in later passages in the Law (Num. 3, 18). The other exception was the ass, which similarly had to be redeemed (or killed by breaking its neck, the point being that sacrifice of the ass was not acceptable).

A special case is made of the ass because it is an unclean animal. (Numbers 18:15 spells out

that the first-born of unclean beasts are to be redeemed rather than sacrificed.) The reason why the ass is singled out in Exodus from unclean beasts in general is probably because it was the only unclean animal that would regularly be found in the domestic context. But why is it specifically mentioned that its neck had to be broken if the ass was not redeemed? Perhaps to draw attention both to its unacceptability as a sacrifice and (therefore) to the importance of redeeming it. No one would want to break the neck of his ass—what a waste of a good animal! If that were the sentiment, then the message is simple: Do as God says and redeem it, and you won't have to!

Both the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the ordinance of the first-born were to be a sign or token upon the hand of the Israelite, and as a memorial or frontlets between his eyes. These are intriguing expressions to interpret. Jewish tradition has taken them literally, of course, binding phylacteries or *tephillin* (a late plural form of the Hebrew word for prayer) upon the hand and the forehead. Inside the phylactery four texts from the Hebrew Bible are placed, as follows:

- Exodus 13:2-10
- Exodus 13:11-17
- Deuteronomy 6:4-9
- Deuteronomy 6:13-23.

But the metaphorical interpretation of tokens on the hand and frontlets between the eyes may not be neglected, even for those who follow a literal interpretation, for there must be some reason for binding boxes of verses on one's head or hand (within Judaism, the Karaite tradition argued for the metaphorical interpretation rather than literal use of phylacteries).

Having a token upon one's hand implies that all one's doing is to be controlled by the significance of what God has done. A memorial between one's eyes means that one's vision is focused upon the observance of God's ordinances and the significance they evoke; both eyes are held and drawn to the goal of what God has done, and the fulfilment of His ordinances becomes a priority. The observance of unleavened bread and the sanctification of the first-born—or rather, what these represent—provide a context, an umbrella, an overriding scheme, under which life is to be lived and framed. There is no time to lose, for God brought us out of Egypt in haste, and we must be hasty to do His will. He is first, and whatever we bring forth (in every sphere) must be first for Him.

1. **v. 3 strength of hand.** The importance of the 'hand' motif has been pointed out in earlier articles. In this section it occurs in verses 3,9,14 and 16.
2. **v. 5 this service.** The use of this term harks back to God's speech to Moses at the burning bush (3:12), and to Moses' demand that Pharaoh should let Israel go to serve the Lord their God, rather than serving Pharaoh.
3. **v. 9 sign.** This term (Heb. *'owth*) occurs 80 times, and is usually rendered 'sign' (60 times) or 'token' (14 times). It is the same term translated 'token' only seven verses later, in verse 16. In Exodus it is used of the plagues on Egypt, the signs which Moses works with his rod, and the token God gives Moses in 3:12. Just as God works signs and wonders, and just as the sign of blood was to mark their doorways (12:13), so Israel are to maintain a sign of their own, as instructed in this verse. The full list of occurrences in Exodus is as follows: 3:12; 4:8,9, 17,28,30; 7:3; 8:23; 10:1,2; 12:13; 13:9,16; 31:13,17.
4. **v. 9 memorial.** The Hebrew derives from the verb 'remember', just like the English. The same term occurs illustratively at 12:14; 17:14; 28:12 and elsewhere. The occurrence of the root at 3:15 is also perhaps relevant. Israel are to keep in memory Who God is (in chapter 3), and just what He has done (in 13:9); a memorial is a device by which something might be remembered, an *aide-mémoire*.
5. **v. 12 set apart.** Literally, 'cause to pass over', using the root '*avar*'. This is not the same Hebrew term as 'Passover', though the coincidence of the English is a happy one! '*avar*' is used again with significance in Exodus 15:16. Note that in 13:2 Israel were commanded to 'sanctify' their first-born (the root which relates to 'making separate', 'holy').
6. **v. 12 matrix.** See under 'womb' in verse 2 ([Oct. 2003](#), p. 367, Note 6).
7. **v. 15 hardly.** As good a translation as any; literally, 'when Pharaoh was hard/severe to let us go'. The term *qashah* is the one used for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in 7:3 (see also 1:14, 'hard', and 6:9, 'cruel').
8. **v. 16 token.** Same word as 'sign' in verse 9.
9. **v. 16 frontlets.** From a Hebrew verb meaning 'to bind, tie around', this term occurs elsewhere only at Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18 (the context is the same as here in both passages; interestingly, the verb 'to bind' in those passages is a different one, *qashar*, although the term for phylacteries/frontlets is the same as the one used here). It is not difficult to see how the Jewish practice originated, and the Deuteronomy passages furnish further details.

Water, wine and the red heifer*

2. The signs

Sarah Joiner

IN PART 1 we considered the ritual of the red heifer and how it foreshadowed the work of Jesus. We now consider Jesus's miracle of transforming water into wine at the marriage feast in Cana, as recorded in John 2, and draw attention to a significant link between the miracle and the ritual.

THE BELOVED disciple calls Jesus's miracles 'signs', and the miracle at Cana the "beginning of signs". Interestingly: "In the synoptics miracles are *dunameis*, 'acts of power', 'mighty works'. In St John they are *erga*, 'works', when Jesus is speaking, and when the evangelist or others are speaking, *semeia*, 'signs', i.e. acts of symbolic, spiritual truth . . . Jesus' signs manifest the glory of God or His Son".¹

In calling Jesus's miraculous works 'signs' the Spirit is drawing our attention to some key points.

It is from *semeia* that we gain our word 'semaphore', the system of waving coloured bats or flags to signal instructions to ships and aircraft. A signal usually warns us of something which is about to happen; it is sometimes a code which encapsulates a valuable message, such as the

* All Scripture quotations are from the NKJV unless otherwise stated.

1. M. Hunter, *According to John* (SCM Press, London, 1968), p. 67.