

Bible Study # 21 Exodus 13.1–16 03–03–2021

The Lord had already claimed the firstborn of Egypt, both human and animal (12:29). Now he was asserting his rights over the men and animals among the Israelites. The people were told to consecrate the firstborn to the Lord, the verb ‘consecrate’ having the idea of setting apart for holy service. The law post-Sinai is given in Deuteronomy 21:15-17, where it is set down that the rights of the firstborn were due to a man’s [procreative] power, i.e. the firstborn was a sign of man’s ability to produce children.

The command Moses gave to the people was that they were to ‘remember’ the day of their leaving Egypt. While this verb ‘remember’ may point to inner mental acts, it is often used in situations where remembering flows over into actions. Clearly such was the case here. Recollection of the exodus events was to prompt the people in the future to observe the appointed annual celebration.

The actual exodus is referred to in two different ways. From the standpoint of the Israelites, they ‘came out’, while from God’s viewpoint he ‘brought out’ his people ‘with a mighty hand’. This latter expression, and its related one, ‘the outstretched arm’ were already known in Canaan in the fifteenth century B.C. and applied to the conquering might of Pharaoh.

Hence, this verse was a challenge to the Egyptian concepts and, in particular, a challenge to the power of Pharaoh. The final sentence in this verse draws attention once more to the prohibition against yeast.

The month of Abib was marked out as a special month by the observance of the Passover. This was the month of ‘ears [of grain]’, identified later with Nisan. The promises of God regarding exit from Egypt were now at the stage of immediate fulfilment. Several factors about the land of Canaan were again noted. First, it was a land about which God had already made promises.

Secondly, it was not unallocated territory, but one in which Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Hivites, and Jebusites were living. Thirdly, it was a good land, a land ‘flowing with milk and honey’. Corresponding to the idea that Israel was being brought out of Egypt is the idea of the Lord bringing them in to Canaan, ‘when he brings you into ...’ v.5).

Emphasis falls again on the prohibition on yeast for the seven days of the Passover celebration (for the previous passages, see 12:15, 18-20). The same two words for yeast are used as in 12:15, 19. In place of breads made with yeast, the people were to eat matsôt (Hebrew word, transliterated into English, ‘matzo’), the word that is still used in modern Hebrew and English for the flat unleavened bread used at Passover.

The didactic aspect of the Passover was very real. Rather than just waiting for children to ask questions about it, the instruction was that the father had the responsibility of telling the redemptive significance of the festival: ‘I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt’. While the Passover had a communal aspect to it, yet the individual had to relate the significance of its personal side.

This is rooted into a truth for Christian fathers today. They are to be the priest of their family and teach their children the stories of God’s care for his people.

The annual Passover celebration is likened to someone who had literally a sign on his hand, and some mark on his forehead to remind him that the Lord had redeemed His people from slavery in Egypt. This idea is expanded further in Deuteronomy 6:4-9 immediately following the Shema‘ (‘Hear, O Israel, ...’). Some Orthodox Jews in the past, as well as down to the present time, have taken this instruction literally.

That these things were practiced in New Testament times is clear from Matthew 23:5 in reference to phylacteries. I have seen people whenever I visited the Western Wall at the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. You might keep this in mind when you hear people commenting on the Revelation of St. John in the New Testament.

However, there are good reasons for taking the words here and in Deuteronomy in a non-literal way. The Lord's law had to be part of their daily conversation, with it always being on their lips. There follows what amounts to a mini-confessional statement: 'For the Lord brought you out of Egypt with his mighty hand.' That in a nutshell was the account of the Israelites' escape from Egypt.

What had transpired was not due to themselves. Rather, it was a sovereign act of God, a display of His mighty power. Keeping this celebration was an obligation upon Israel. While the NIV has 'year after year' this phrase is better understood as 'once every year'. Literally it means 'from days to days', and on the basis of its use in 1 Samuel 1:3 and 2:19, it is better to take it in this alternative way.

Moses looked ahead to the situation that would exist when Israel was in possession of Canaan. Later, Israel's connection would be so strong with the land that the language of the people is called 'the lip of Canaan' (Isa. 19:18). The Israelites had God's pledged word that they would have possession of that land, something that had been promised to the patriarchs and repeatedly restated right down to this time.

God's claim was over the firstborn of the livestock. They belonged to Him. The use of the verb 'give over' is a reminder of the previous use of the same verb to describe how the angel of death 'passed over' the Israelite homes (12:13). Later, this verb will be used of the action of Israel in 'crossing over' the Red Sea (15:16).

Two new provisions are now given. First, a donkey could be redeemed with a lamb, as it was an unclean animal and therefore could not be used in sacrifice. Later, the price of such redemption was set at five silver shekels (Num. 18:15-16). If the donkey was not redeemed, it was to be killed by breaking its neck so that it was unavailable for any use.

Secondly, no firstborn child was to be killed, but rather redeemed. Israel was not to suffer what the Egyptians had to suffer when the angel of death swept through the land (12:29).

14-16 These verses are very similar to 12:24-27 and 13:8-10. Such repetition is common in the Pentateuch (cf. Deut. 6:4-9 with Deut. 11:18-21). The stress in them is on the fact of the divine power exhibited in the events surrounding the exit from Egypt. It was accomplished by the mighty hand of the Lord (vv. 14, 16), a graphic anthropomorphic phrase to describe divine power.

God's response to Pharaoh's hardness of heart was the judgment that fell on the firstborn of Egypt, both man and animal. The explanation to be given to any inquiry by children was to be that the facts of God's judgment were the reason for this continual practice of sacrifice at the time of the Passover celebration (v. 15). While the firstborn of animals would be sacrificed, the firstborn son was to be redeemed.

Verse 15 marks the first occurrence in the Old Testament of a verb meaning 'to redeem' (pâdâh). It is a verb whose meaning overlaps with another verb for 'redeem', gâ'al (used already in 6:6), and these verbs can be used in parallel (see Jer. 31:11 and Hosea 13:14). Here the idea is of man redeeming his son, but the wider concept of God the redeemer became extremely important in both the Old and New Testaments.

Just as the Passover celebration was said to be 'a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead' (v. 9), so this sacrifice was to be 'a sign on your hand and a symbol on your forehead'. The point is that here in Exodus 13:9, 16, as in Deuteronomy 6:9, these are metaphorical expressions that were not meant to be taken in a literal way.

Instead of the phrase, 'a reminder on your forehead' in verse 9, here in verse 16 a different word is used. Later Judaism took these words in a literal way to mean a sign of some kind on the forehead, and these 'frontlets' became standard practice, and remain so for extremely orthodox Jews. It was an ostentatious way of proclaiming obedience to the law and called for a rebuke by Jesus in His ministry (Matt. 23:5).

Our next study will cover Exodus 13.17–22.