

Institution of the Passover

(Exodus 12:1–28)

This section of the book relates the detailed instructions relating to the first Passover and the command to observe the Passover event throughout subsequent history. It gives various laws relating to the Passover meal (12:1–11), the placing of blood on the doors of houses (12:7, 21–22) and the manner of celebrating the Feast of Unleavened Bread (12:14–20). Finally, the passage provides the divine rationale and purpose for the Passover event.

12:1–2. And Yahweh spoke to Moses and to Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, ‘This month shall be the first of the months for you; it is to be the first month of the year for you.’

Laws concerning the Passover were given ‘in Egypt’ (12:1). The designation of the location is for the purpose of not ascribing all Hebrew laws to Mount Sinai (Exod. 20 onwards). In other words, the Israelites were not a lawless society prior to the giving of the codified law at Sinai. It is also interesting to note that the laws given at Sinai rarely deal with the Passover in detail (except Deut. 16)—the reason is clear: the Passover laws were already set down in Egypt.

This announcement does not mean a change in the Hebrew calendar. The text literally reads, ‘This month is for you the first month.’ Thus it is at the time of the Hebrew new year that the Passover occurs. And now the Israelites truly have something to celebrate—a new beginning that is born of redemption from Egypt! Other texts inform us that the opening month is Abib (see Exod. 13:4; 23:15; 34:18). In the later Jewish calendar from the Babylonian exile it is referred to as Nisan (Neh. 2:1; Esther 3:7). The new year generally corresponds to the months of March and April.

12:3. ‘Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying, “On the tenth of this month, they shall take for themselves—a man shall take a lamb for his family, a lamb for his household.”’

This is the first reference in the Bible to ‘the congregation of Israel’. The word ‘dh means ‘a gathering’. The Septuagint, the Vulgate and multiple medieval manuscripts prefer the reading, ‘the sons of Israel’. There is, however, no necessity for such an emendation. We are viewing for the first time the establishment of the Hebrews as a corporate entity.

Each ‘family’ is to secure a lamb. That term is literally ‘house of the fathers’, and it corresponds to an extended family, a sub-unit of a clan. The lamb is to be procured on the tenth day of the first month. That specific day is important: Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) occurs on the tenth day of the seventh month (Lev. 23:27), and the Israelites cross the Jordan River into the promised land on the tenth day of the first month. The number ten often symbolizes completion in the Bible: for example, the Ten Commandments, the ten plagues, etc. Here it may signify the complete redemption of Israel out of Egypt.

12:4. ‘If a household is too small for a lamb, then he and his neighbour, closest to his house, shall take one according to the number of persons. According to what each person will eat, you will divide the lamb.’

Verse 4 opens with a particle introducing an ‘if ... then’ clause in Hebrew. If there are not enough members in a family to consume the entire lamb then two neighbouring (‘near’) families may join in the feast. It would also allow two families to share the expenses of the meal.

According to Josephus (Sarna tells us): ‘... a minimum quorum of ten participants was required for this ritual in Second Temple times. The actual slaughtering of the animal was performed in groups of no fewer than thirty.’

Why the entire sacrifice is to be consumed is not stated in the text. Perhaps it is to signify complete and total redemption from the land of Egypt.

12:5. ‘An unblemished male lamb, one year old, shall be for you; from the sheep or from the goats you may take it.’

The characteristics required of the animal to be sacrificed and eaten are now spelled out. First, the beast shall be ‘complete’, ‘perfect’, or ‘unblemished’. The purity of sacrifice is thus demanded. It is also to be a one-year old male, which according to later law at Sinai is a clean animal. Therefore, the animal may be offered as a sacrifice and eaten.

The animals sacrificed may be either sheep or goats. The Hebrew term includes both kinds. Later prophets use the imagery of a sacrificial lamb for the work of the coming Messiah. Isaiah 53:7 says, 'He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so he did not open his mouth.'

12:6. 'Keep watch over them until the fourteenth day of this month, when all the community of the congregation of Israel shall sacrifice them at twilight.'

Each family is to 'guard' or 'keep watch over' the sacrificial animal for four days—it is to be protected from any defect or unholy intrusion. Then on the fourteenth day of the first month the people are to slaughter the lambs/goats simultaneously. The sacrifice is a united act of worship.

The term 'community' is found for the first time referring to the people of God. It literally means 'assembly': the people of Israel are congregating for a communal worship service. This act of redemption is solidifying the Hebrews as one covenanted people before Yahweh.

The time of the community sacrifice is unclear. A direct translation of the Hebrew says, 'between the two sunsets/evenings'. Some scholars have suggested this means 'twilight', that is, between sunset and dark.

12:7. 'Then they shall take from the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses in which they are eating.'

Each family is to take blood from the sacrificed animal and put it 'on the two door-posts and on the lintel' of the entrance to the house. Every part of the entrance is to have blood smeared on it. The purpose of this act is stated later in verse 13: it is an external sign that those within are those numbered among the people of Yahweh. In other words, it is a pointer to their having been set apart as part of the community of God.

Why use blood as the sign? Throughout the Old Testament, the shedding of blood often signifies entrance into, and being part of, the covenant with God (see, for example, Gen. 15:9–17; 17:9–14). Blood is the essence of life, and thus it symbolizes the extremity of the covenant relationship extending to life and death. The Hebrews bear the sign of God and live; the Egyptians have no sign and many die.

12:8. 'And they shall eat the flesh on that night, roasted in fire, and unleavened bread with bitter herbs they shall eat with it.'

The Hebrew people were to eat the animal roasted or fully cooked. This was an innovation because in the ancient Near East spring rituals of pagans included eating a raw or half-cooked sacrifice. The Lord was abolishing such bloody festivals of idolatry.

'Unleavened bread' (mätsāh) was also to be eaten at the Passover meal. It signifies the Hebrews' quick departure from Egypt. They did not have time to allow the bread to leaven, but they left with unleavened bread bound up in clothes over their shoulders (see 12:34).

'Bitter herbs' were included in the feast. These are symbolic of their bitter lives under slavery in Egypt (see Exod. 1:14). But now they would be freed from that bitterness!

12:9. 'Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but only roasted in fire, its head, along with its legs, and along with its inner parts.'

Reiteration of the requirement for roasting the animal serves to stress the method of cooking. The text adds that the various parts of the animal are to be roasted at the same time: no parts are to be withheld from the fire. This prescription was kept throughout Israel's history of the Passover, as confirmed by 2 Chronicles 35:13: 'So they roasted the Passover [animals] on the fire according to the ordinance, and they boiled the holy things in pots, in kettles, in pans, and carried them speedily to all the lay people.'

12:10. 'Do not leave any of it until morning, but what remains of it until the morning you will burn with fire.' Hebrew *lō'*, the negative, with an imperfect verb, is common in legislative texts of the Old Testament (eight of the Ten Commandments are so structured). It is a prohibition in legal literature. That is what appears at the beginning of the verse: here is a law that Israel must keep.

The sacrifice was to be eaten in totality. However, if that was not possible what remained was to be burned up. The meat of the animal had been set apart for the Passover celebration; it was too sacred to

be used at any other time. The Hebrews were not to save any meat for later. In addition, the full consumption of the sacrifice points to its completeness and efficacy. It signifies a full-scale redemption. 12:11. 'This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the Passover of Yahweh.'

Each person who consumes the sacrifice must be arrayed in the following way: fully clothed, with a belt around the waist, sandals on the feet and a staff for walking in the hand. This manner of dress implies that the Israelites must be ready to depart Egypt at a moment's notice during the night-time festivity. While fully dressed, the participants are to eat the meat 'in haste'. This term in the original Hebrew does not only mean 'quickly', but it bears a great sense of alarm/trepidation/danger.

The word for 'Passover' is pēsāh. This is the first time it is used in the Bible. The precise meaning of the word in the original is much disputed. In any event, pēsāh. is the principal term throughout Scripture that designates the celebration of the redemption of Israel out of Egypt (see Exod. 12:21, 27, 43, 48; 34:25; etc.). There is no evidence or reason to believe that this was an established term or concept appropriated by the Hebrews at this time.

The Passover is not primarily about the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt. Nor is it mainly about the humiliation of Pharaoh and Egypt. Rather its essential purpose is the glorification and exaltation of Yahweh: 'It is Yahweh's Passover.'

12:12. 'And I will pass through the land of Egypt on this night and I will strike every first-born in the land of Egypt, from mankind to animal. And I will bring judgement against all the gods of Egypt. I am Yahweh.' The theme of the exodus event is here declared. God will demonstrate his superiority over 'all' the false gods of Egypt (which has already been demonstrated by the plagues against specific gods). Pharaoh is included. All of these are non-gods. This is a great statement of monotheism.

Antagonism is confirmed by the adversative use of the preposition beth in the verse: 'And I will bring judgement against all the gods of Egypt.' The contest of deities is about to reach a climax.

12:13. 'And the blood will be a sign for you on the houses in which you are. And I will see the blood, and I will pass over you. And no plague will be upon you for destruction when I strike the land of Egypt.'

In the tenth plague, God will again make a distinction between his people and Pharaoh's people. Those who belong to Yahweh will bear upon their houses the sign of blood, and they will not be struck by the plague. Those who do not mark their homes with blood will suffer the plague.

It should be observed that the blood is merely 'a sign'. It is a physical symbol that points to a spiritual reality; that is, the people inside the houses covered with blood belong to Yahweh. The blood does not cause the people to be Yahweh's, but simply acts as a billboard proclaiming the fact.

The verb 'I will pass over' is psh. Derived from this verb is the Hebrew name for the Passover, Pesach. Yahweh's act of passing over the covenant people in this final plague is why the feast is called Pesach, or 'passing over'.

12:14. 'This day is a memorial for you, and you will celebrate it as a feast to Yahweh throughout your generations. You are to celebrate it as a lasting ordinance.'

Passover is to have an abiding character, i.e., it is to be celebrated 'throughout your generations'. Thus it is not only for the Hebrews in Egypt, but for their posterity, so that future generations might understand and remember the great deliverance of Yahweh when he brought the children of Israel out of Egypt.

This verse uses three terms to define the Passover. First, it is 'a memorial'. That noun derives from the verb that means 'to remember/remind'. Passover, therefore, is to serve as a reminder to the Hebrew people of their lives of slavery and of the events of their redemption.

Secondly, Passover is 'a feast'. A 'feast of gathering' or a 'pilgrim-feast' is what is especially signified by this word. The Hebrews are being called together and appear before Yahweh; it is a communal celebration (see Exod. 23:14-17).

Finally, Passover is 'a lasting ordinance'. The Hebrew term for 'ordinance' means 'law/rule/statute'. And thus we see a law given to Israel by God that precedes the laws revealed at Sinai. Israel is not lawless before the meeting at the mount. Note, in addition, the continuous, binding nature of the ordinance:

bound to 'law' is a masculine adjective which means various things, but in the context of our passage probably signifies 'in perpetuity/in continuous existence'.

The command to keep the Passover is emphasized by the reiteration of this law in Exodus 12:24 and 13:10.

12:15. 'Seven days you will eat unleavened bread, but on the first day you will remove all leaven from your houses. Because anyone who eats leaven—his life will be cut off from Israel, from the first day to the seventh day.'

Further regulations and details of the Passover celebration are now set out. Three ordinances are set forth in this verse. First, the Hebrews are allowed only to eat bread without yeast during the festival period. Secondly, they are to 'remove all leaven from [their] houses'—apparently this directive would keep them from accidentally using leaven in their food. And, finally, the feast is to last for seven days (the number seven, of course, often reflects the idea of completion).

The sanction of being 'cut off' from Israel is a common penalty in the Torah (see, e.g., Lev. 17:10; 20:3, 5, 6). In a general sense, it means that one is no longer considered part of the covenant community of Israel or receives any of the blessings associated with membership of that community. A person is simply denied fellowship with, and standing in, the people of Israel. It is a very serious consequence, and it underscores the gravity and importance of the Passover ordinances.

12:16. 'And on the first day will be a holy convocation and on the seventh day there will be a holy convocation for you. No work shall be done on them, except that which is eaten—that alone may be made by you.'

On the first day and on the last day of the feast the Hebrews are to have 'a holy convocation', a gathering together of the people of God. The term 'sacred assembly/holy convocation' is used seventeen times in the Torah (eleven times in Lev. 23, four times in Num. 28–29, and twice in Exodus). This is its first appearance in the Bible. It is a technical term for a religious gathering on the Sabbath or on other sacred, set-apart days.

The prohibition against any work on these two days is relayed in the strongest possible form in the Hebrew. When the negative is used with 'all/any' it expresses absolute negation, absolutely none whatsoever. In this sense, the first and last days of Passover operate in much the same way as the later Sabbath (see Exod. 20:8–11).

12:17. 'Keep the feast of unleavened bread, because on this very day I brought out your hosts from the land of Egypt. And you shall keep this day throughout your generations as a lasting ordinance.'

The opening phrase of the verse literally says, 'Keep [or 'guard'] the mātsōt', i.e., the unleavened bread. This has received various interpretations. Some, such as the NIV translators, argue that there is an ellipsis here; that is, the term for 'feast' has been omitted (probably through a later scribal error). The translators of the Septuagint and the Samaritan Pentateuch believe the word mātsōt' was somehow copied incorrectly and should really be mīts'vāh (Hebrew for 'commandment'), so that the phrase should read, 'Keep the commandment,' referring to the previous Passover commands. Some rabbinical interpretation takes the statement at face value and says it literally means to guard and protect the bread of the Passover so that no impure element (such as leaven) should get into the food.

The description of the way God is bringing the Hebrews out of Egypt, according to 'hosts', or divisions, has military overtones (see commentary on 6:26).

The final clause says that the Passover celebration shall be 'a lasting ordinance for the generations to come'. These precise words occur earlier, in verse 14. That repetition is to underscore the importance and benefit of the Passover to future generations, to the posterity of the Hebrews.

The verb used in this verse, 'I brought', is a Hiphil perfect. The perfect tense/aspect in Hebrew signifies completed action. But how can this be if the events of deliverance have not yet occurred? Perhaps it is what Gesenius calls the perfectum confidentiae; that is, it expresses facts which are undoubtedly imminent. Because God is speaking these words they will indeed come to pass!

12:18. 'On the fourteenth day of the first month, in the evening, you will eat unleavened bread until the twenty-first day of the month, in the evening.'

Holy, set-apart days and weeks begin and end in the evening. Leviticus 23:32 says, 'From evening until evening you shall keep the Sabbath.' This custom may perhaps reflect the creation week of Genesis 1 in which the creation days apparently commenced in the evening: '... and there was evening and there was morning, day one' (1:5).

12:19. 'Seven days no yeast will be found in your houses, because whoever is eating leaven—that person shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is an alien or a native of the land.'

The yeast laws and their sanctions apply not only to the native citizen of the people of God ('the congregation of Israel') but also to the 'alien' or 'sojourner'. The Hebrew word refers to a resident alien, a person to be distinguished from a foreigner. It is someone who has taken up permanent residence in Israel but is not an Israelite by birth or inheritance. In Israel, the alien had a special status and had various rights, such as religious participation.

In this verse, the Passover statutes apply to both the alien and the native. However, a further restriction for alien participation in the feast is given: the ger may not eat the lamb or celebrate the festival unless he is circumcised, as was the native Israelite. He must wear the physical sign of belonging to the people of God or he is not included in the celebration.

For the consequence of disobedience, see the commentary on 12:15.

The Hebrew preposition b' (or beth) is attached to both 'alien' and 'native-born'. Its use here is that of specification and it serves to qualify the realm of the verbal action. In other words, it has the sense of 'with regard to'.

12:20. 'You shall not eat any yeast. In all your dwellings you shall eat unleavened bread.'

The conclusion to the prohibition of eating leavened food and the directive to eat matsah is emphasized in this verse. Its structure is in the form of an antithetic parallelism with an internal chiasmic structure. The verse looks like this (direct translation from original):

a
b

Anything leavened
you shall not eat.

c
b1
a1

In all your houses
you shall eat
mätsöt.

This type of structure in a narrative serves to accentuate, or to bring to a climax, the preceding prose section.

12:21. Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel, and he said to them, 'Go at once and take for yourselves lambs according to your families and slaughter the Passover lamb.'

Moses now instructs the people to begin preparations for the initial Passover. Additional particulars are added in this section to the general statutes already given by the prophet. In this verse, we are told that the elders of Israel are the ones to prepare and administer the feast/sacrament of Passover. The elder is to care for the families that have been placed under his charge and authority.

'Go at once' is an imperative in Hebrew that means 'Proceed/lead'. It is the elders as the leaders in Israel who are to obey God's statutes first, and then the community will follow.

12:22. 'You shall take a bunch of hyssop and you shall dip it in the blood which is in the basin, and you shall touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood which is in the basin. And none of you shall go out of the door of his house until morning.'

Now Moses explains to the elders the method and manner of applying the blood-sign to the Israelites' homes. The elders are to use hyssop to smear the blood on the dwellings. Hyssop is a plant with many stalks, and its use prevents the blood from coagulating. It is employed in the administration of other rites in the Old Testament, primarily in regard to purification (see Num. 19:18). Hyssop later developed into a symbol of purification, as we read in Psalm 51:7: 'Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.'

The Hebrew term translated 'basin' has two distinct meanings. On the one hand, it can be translated as 'basin' or 'goblet' (see, for example, 2 Sam. 17:28; 1 Kings 7:50). But the word is more often used as a noun masculine for 'threshold' or 'sill' (see, for example, Judg. 19:27; Ezek. 43:8; etc.). If the latter translation is correct for verse 22, it implies that the entire structure of the door—lintel, doorposts and threshold—is to be covered with blood. It would then demonstrate a complete covering of the people inside.

12:23. 'And Yahweh will pass through to strike Egypt, and he will see the blood on the lintel and upon the two doorposts. And he will pass over the door, and he will not allow the destroyer to come to your houses to strike.'

The identity of 'the destroyer' is a matter of disagreement among commentators. Some define it in an impersonal way. Sarna, for instance, argues that 'The plague, although personified, is not an independent demonic being. It can only operate within the limits fixed by God.' While I would agree that the destroyer is not an 'independent demonic being', I would disagree regarding its impersonal nature. Rather, the figure is probably to be identified with an angel of Yahweh. In 1 Chronicles 21:9–17, an angel of the Lord serves as a destroying force against David and Jerusalem because of an uncalled-for census.

12:24. 'You shall keep this event as an ordinance for you and for your children for ever.'

As in verse 17 (where the verb 'keep' occurs twice), the binding nature of the Passover ordinances is emphasized in the present verse. It is also a rite that must be carefully taught to children so that its meaning and significance would pass from generation to generation. The posterity of the Hebrews would be prime beneficiaries of the Passover event. It is thus 'a lasting ordinance' (NIV), one that is to be honoured and observed in perpetuity.

12:25. 'And it will be when you come to the land which Yahweh is giving to you as he said, then you will keep this ceremony.'

The land that God had promised the Hebrews is Canaan, and it was given to Abraham and his seed many centuries before (see Gen. 12:7). The Israelites are to make certain that they keep the Passover ritual in the land flowing with milk and honey. They are not to forget what God has done for them as a people. One of the first acts of the Hebrews after entering the land was in fact the observation of the Passover (Josh. 5:10).

The Hebrew word for 'ceremony' is the common term for labour/service. Used earlier of the Hebrews' slavery under Pharaoh (Exod. 1:14), it here reflects who it is that the Israelites truly serve. And the contrast is clear: the hard and cruel service they rendered to Pharaoh is now replaced by a compassionate, loving service to Yahweh.

12:26–27. 'And when your children say to you, "What does this ceremony mean to you?", you will say, "It is the Passover sacrifice to Yahweh, when he passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he struck Egypt but he delivered our houses." ' And the people bowed down and worshipped.

Here at the conclusion of his instructions to the people, Moses reiterates the pedagogic aspect of the Passover ritual. When children see the events of the Passover celebration they will naturally be curious. Parents are to seize the opportunity to share with their children the story of redemption from Egypt, and continually to remind them of the God who acts.

The response of the people was, literally, that ‘They bowed down and prostrated themselves.’ This is a Hebrew idiom reflecting a scene of worship, praise and adoration. It was used earlier in the book of Exodus (see commentary on 4:31).

12:28. And the children of Israel went and did as Yahweh commanded Moses and Aaron, thus they did. Worship of Yahweh is soon followed by action. Obedience is born out of obeisance. What the Hebrews did was to make preparations for the Passover; that is, they complied with all the instructions and ordinances that Moses had just given to them.

The fact of their submission to the Torah commands is confirmed by the repetition of the verb ‘to do’. The verse literally reads, ‘The sons of Israel did what Yahweh commanded Moses and Aaron, thus they did.’ That same grammatical construction was earlier used of Moses and Aaron when they obeyed God’s directives right down to the very details (see commentary on 7:6).

Application

A critical teaching of this foregoing section is the temporal application of the Passover commands. Passover is to be observed by the people of God throughout history, from one generation to the next. This injunction is intensified by its appearance three times in the passage under consideration (vv. 14, 17, 24). The continuous, binding character of the Passover celebration raises a question for the church: how does the church keep this command? Do we celebrate Passover?

The Lord’s Supper in the New Testament is a Passover commemoration (see Matt. 26:17–19). Every Passover meal included two elements: wine and unleavened bread. The wine symbolized the blood of the lamb that was shed for the Israelites to protect them from the avenging angel. The bread signified the bread that the Hebrews carried on their backs when they left Egypt in haste. Jesus reinterprets those two elements and pronounces the Passover event a type of foreshadowing of himself and his ministry. In Matthew 26:26–28, Jesus says that the wine is a figure of the blood of Christ that takes away the sins of his people, and the bread is a figure of his body that is hung on the cross for sinners. In short, what Jesus is proclaiming is that he is the Passover Lamb, who by the shedding of his blood is a substitute for his people, protecting them from the wrath and judgement of God. In other words, as Israel is covered by the blood of the Passover lamb, so the new Israel is covered by the blood of the Messiah (see John 1:29; 1 Peter 1:19; 1 Cor. 5:7).

The fact of the matter is that when Christians celebrate the Lord’s Supper they are keeping the Passover that God commanded his people to honour in perpetuity. The Scots Confession of 1560 puts it this way: As the fathers under the Law, besides the reality of the sacrifices, had two chief sacraments, that is, circumcision and the Passover, and those who rejected these were not reckoned among God’s people; so do we acknowledge and confess that now in the time of the gospel we have two chief sacraments, which alone were instituted by the Lord Jesus and commanded to be used by all who will be counted members of his body, that is, Baptism and the Supper or Table of the Lord Jesus, also called the Communion of His Body and Blood.

The reason that Christians celebrate the Passover in this way is, first, to remind themselves of the work of Christ in delivering his people from death and darkness. It is, furthermore, a sign that believers are the people of God and the covenant, and that God dwells in their midst. And, finally, it is a sign of the continuity of the people of God from the Old Testament to the New Testament and beyond.