

Death of the first-born

(Exodus 12:29–36)

This section records the historical event of the first Passover. Everything that God has told Israel to prepare for now comes to pass. Included in the account is the death of the first-born, the expulsion of the Hebrews from the land by Pharaoh and the despoiling of the Egyptians.

12:29. And it came to pass at midnight that Yahweh struck all the first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh who was sitting on his throne to the first-born of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the first-born of the animals.

What took place at the first Passover is now described by the biblical author. All the Egyptians without exception are struck by the plague. The all-embracing nature of the disaster is accentuated by the use of two all-inclusive opposites: the plague strikes the family of Pharaoh, who sits in luxury on his throne, and it also hits the families of prisoners, those 'dwelling in the house of the pit'. It spans all, from the one who enjoys the greatest comfort to the one in the situation of least comfort (cf. 11:5 in which a different image is used to reflect the idea of hardship).

The first-born of Egyptian animals are also destroyed, as Moses had prophesied in 11:5 (see commentary on that verse).

12:30. And Pharaoh arose that night and all his servants and all Egypt. And a great cry was [heard] in Egypt because there was not a house in which there was not one who died.

The extent of the final plague is stressed by this verse. It concludes with a statement of result or consequence: 'because there was not a house in which there was not one who died'. That clause carries a double negative, a particle that means non-being or non-existence. Thus, the plague is exhaustive in its outcome for the land of Egypt.

The serious nature of the plague is also highlighted by the singling out of Pharaoh in the passage. First, he is humiliated by being forced to rise from his bed in the middle of the night, a procedure that is clearly not one normally associated with royalty. And, more critically, the king's house is subject to the consequences of the plague. It is a true statement that the final plague is primarily directed against Pharaoh as a god of Egypt and against the Egyptian royal succession. Numbers 33:4 links the Passover with the judgement upon the deities of Egypt.

12:31. And he called for Moses and for Aaron at night, and he said, 'Rise up, go out from the midst of my people—both you and the children of Israel! Go, serve Yahweh as you have said!'

As a result of the tenth plague, Pharaoh was desperate to rid his land of the Hebrews. The urgency to expedite Israel's departure is emphasized in this verse. First, Pharaoh employs four imperatives: 'Rise up, go out ... Go, serve!' The first two imperatives are found elsewhere in Scripture to indicate great haste. In Genesis 19:14, Lot urges his sons-in-law with these imperatives to flee for their lives from Sodom.

The King of Egypt is humbled. He is forced to summon to the palace the very men he had banished from it earlier (see 10:28). He also, for the first time, calls the Hebrews by the name, 'the children of Israel', or Israelites. This appears to be an acknowledgement of their status as a people—not yet a nation but in the process of becoming one.

Finally, the answer to the question of whom the Hebrews will serve/worship is given out of Pharaoh's very own mouth: 'Go, serve Yahweh!'

12:32. 'Take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and go! And also bless me.'

Pharaoh now concedes all the demands of the Hebrew prophets and withdraws all his previous limitations and restrictions. All the children of Israel may leave Egypt, and all their flocks with them. In addition, Pharaoh gives no time-frame for their departure and places no restrictions on how long they may be gone. Apparently, at least for the moment, the King of Egypt has been defeated.

The ultimate humiliation of Pharaoh is seen in his seeking the blessing of the prophets even after his defeat. Childs remarks that Pharaoh 'even seeks from Moses a blessing which serves to underline Moses' complete victory'. Was this request honourable? Was it a sign of true remorse? Or was it sarcasm? What

we can say with certainty is that there was no real repentance on the part of the king. He gave no recognition of any personal responsibility—he wanted the blessing without the liability, the shame, or the consequences. He simply desired the plagues to be gone. We know this to be the case, because once the immediate shock following the final plague had subsided, the Egyptian king pursued the Hebrews in order to destroy them.

12:33. The Egyptians urged the people to make haste, to send them out from the country, because they said, ‘We shall all die.’

A literal rendering of the opening of this verse reads, ‘And the Egyptians pressed/made strong upon the people.’ Ironically, the verb is the same one that is used of God hardening or making strong Pharaoh’s heart (see 7:13, 22; 8:15). Thus, previously the Egyptian hearts were hardened not to let the Hebrews go (9:34), but now they are equally determined to force them to leave.

The act of strengthening is so that the Hebrews would be sent out—this is the Hebrew verb so frequently used in the exodus account. The opening salvo between the Hebrew prophets and Pharaoh focused on that verb: ‘Thus says Yahweh, God of Israel, “Send out my people ...” ’ (5:1). Now the Egyptians are causing the Hebrews to be sent out!

The Egyptians are worried and faltering. They want the Hebrews to depart, literally, ‘because all of us are dying’. The latter is a participial form, and ‘the participle is the form which indicates continued action ...’ From the perspective of the Egyptians, if the Hebrews stay in the land Pharaoh’s people will indeed all perish.

12:34. So the people lifted onto their shoulders dough [which] had not yet been leavened, in kneading bowls wrapped in clothes.

Prior to departing from Egypt the Hebrews perform two further acts. The first is stated in this verse. They place dough in ‘kneading bowls’ (this term is used earlier in 8:3), and carry them upon their shoulders wrapped in garments. They had no time to leaven the dough or to cook it in Egypt. Great haste was the order of the day. It is in commemoration of this event that unleavened bread has been part of the Passover celebrations throughout history. Deuteronomy 16:3 says in regard to the instructions for Passover: ‘You shall not eat leavened bread with it; seven days you shall eat with it unleavened bread, the bread of affliction (for you came out of the land of Egypt in haste), in order that you may remember all the days of your life the day when you came out of the land of Egypt.’

A temporal adverb is found in this verse: it has an adversative affect, meaning ‘not yet’. Also, when it is followed by an imperfect verb, as it is in this case, the verb is in the pluperfect tense. The correct reading of the clause is therefore: ‘And the people lifted ... dough, [which] had not yet been leavened ...’

12:35–36. And the children of Israel did as Moses said, and they asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and articles of gold and clothing. And Yahweh gave favour to the people in the eyes of the Egyptians, so they gave them what they requested. Thus they plundered the Egyptians.

This event is the fulfilment of the commands that God had given to the people in 3:21–22 and 11:2–3 (see the commentary on both those passages).

Application

It is important to realize that the Passover event was a historical incident, that it was set and fixed in time and space. It was not merely an idea or a belief that found its reality in future celebrations, but it really did happen. The same can be said for the significance of the Lord’s Supper. That Christian ritual truly represents the historical episode of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul underscores the gravity and weight of the historicity of those events in the following passage: ‘Now if Christ is preached, that he has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain’ (1 Cor. 15:12–14).

The very essence of biblical religion and faith is the fact that what the Bible records actually occurred in history.