

Reiteration of Passover commands (Exodus 12:43–13:10)

A third rehearsal of the Passover laws is found in this section, especially in Exodus 13:3–10. There we see the general laws, barring yeast from the festival, giving the directive to teach the meaning of Passover to children and issuing the command to keep this feast in perpetuity. New, more detailed instructions are set out in Exodus 12:43–49, in which those who are allowed to participate in the feast are listed and described.

12:43. And Yahweh said to Moses and to Aaron, ‘This is the ordinance of the Passover: any son of a foreigner shall not eat of it.’

One of the principal teachings of this next section relating to the Passover is to define who may or may not partake of the festival. Regulations begin with a negative injunction: ‘Any son of a foreigner may not eat of it.’ The title ‘son of a foreigner’ signifies a non-Israelite who temporarily dwells with the people of God (see Deut. 23:20). That person does not profess the religion of Yahweh and is not a member of the covenant. Passover participation is restricted to Israelites.

The verb ‘eat’ is followed by the preposition *b’* and the pronominal suffix ‘it’. It is the partitive use of the preposition which implies the ‘idea of an action as extending to something, with at the same time the secondary idea of participation in something’. Thus, part of the restriction is that no foreigner is to participate in any part of the Passover communal event.

12:44–45. ‘Any slave, one who has been bought with silver, after you have circumcised him, then he may eat of it. A temporary resident and a hired worker may not eat of it.’

The statute of verse 43 is now spelt out in further detail in these two verses. The general principle is: ‘Any son of a foreigner may not eat of it’ (i.e., the Passover, 12:43). However, there is one exception to the rule: the slave in Israel who has been circumcised is now part of the covenant people, and he may therefore participate in the Passover. This privilege is in accord with the circumcision commands of Genesis 17:12–13.

Two groups who do not have covenant status are the ‘temporary resident’ and the ‘hired worker’. The first is a person who has a very temporary relationship with Israel, much more so than the ‘alien’ or ‘sojourner’ referred to in 12:19. The second is, strictly speaking, a mercenary worker who has been hired to work in Israel. These groups have no religious commitment to Yahweh, and they are thus denied access to the festival.

12:46. ‘In one house it must be eaten; anything from the flesh shall not be brought out of the house to the outside. And you shall not break any bone of it.’

The prohibition of breaking any of the bones of the Passover sacrifice has received various interpretations. R. de Vaux, for instance, argues that in ‘the Passover sacrifice the bones would not be broken in order that God might restore the victim to life, i.e. ensure the fertility of the flock’. He draws this conclusion on the basis of apparent modern Arab parallels. Sarna comments that the law prevents the Hebrews from breaking bones in order ‘to suck out the marrow’. The meat of the animal should have been completely satisfying. There is not much supporting evidence for either of these explanations.

G. A. Barton suggests that some parallels to this activity are known from ancient Egypt. His argument is not very convincing.

M. Noth has the most balanced understanding of this restriction. The wholeness of the victim symbolizes the communal character of the sacrifice; that is, it emphasizes the cohesion of the family unit at worship. The end of the verse is quoted in John 19:36 at the crucifixion of Christ. The point is simply that Jesus is the paschal lamb (cf. 1 Cor. 5:7). Leon Morris put it this way: ‘When that sacrifice was instituted the command was given that not one bone was to be broken. If this is the allusion then John is viewing Jesus as the perfect Passover offering.’

12:47. ‘The whole congregation of Israel shall do it.’

In contrast to the foreign groups mentioned in verses 43 and 45, the entire 'congregation of Israel', without exception, is to partake of the Passover feast. Apparently that term signifies all who are circumcised (i.e., bearing the sign of the covenant), and their wives and children, assembling together for worship. The Septuagint translates this word as 'synagogue', and it has a similar meaning.

12:48. 'And when a stranger sojourns with you, and he celebrates the Passover to Yahweh, every one of his males must be circumcised; and then he may draw near to celebrate it. And he shall be like a native of the land. And anyone uncircumcised may not eat of it.'

The opening words of the verse involve a word-play in the Hebrew: 'And when a sojourner sojourns with you ...' A 'sojourner' is different from the 'foreigner' of verse 43. The former has lived in the land with the people of Israel for some time. He has settled in the land and therefore he has privileges. The sojourner 'as a resident enjoys the rights of assistance, protection, and religious participation. He has the right of gleaning (Lev. 19:10; 23:22), participation in the tithe (Deut. 14:29), the Sabbath year (Lev. 25:6), and the cities of refuge (Num. 35:15).' He could not, however, participate in the Passover unless circumcised. This verse is for the future. It envisages what was stated back in verse 25, that is, the settlement of the Israelites in the land of milk and honey.

The word for 'circumcised' is an infinitive absolute in Hebrew. It is being employed here as a legislative, jussive form; in other words, it is volitional, a word of command.

12:49. 'One law shall be for the native and for the sojourner who sojourns in your midst.'

This sentence literally begins with the words: 'One Torah shall be for ...' The term 'Torah' simply means 'instruction/teaching/law'. In the grammatical construction of the sentence 'one Torah' precedes the verb for the sake of emphasis.

The one law is that circumcision is a requirement for participation in Passover. It applies to the 'native' Israelite as well as to the 'sojourner'. Often in the Pentateuch these two terms are used in opposition to one another for the purpose of inclusiveness (Lev. 16:29; Num. 9:14; 15:29).

'One Torah' is a feminine noun qualified by a feminine adjective. However, in this verse it takes a masculine verb. Some would argue that the 'instances in which the gender or number of the following predicate appears to differ from that of the subject are due partly to manifest errors in the text'. That conclusion is probably incorrect. Rather, this 'priority of masculine gender is due in part to the intensely androcentric character of the world of the Hebrew Bible'. It is what grammarians sometimes call 'the prior gender'.

12:50. And all the children of Israel did just as Yahweh commanded Moses and Aaron.

This verse contains verbal reiteration for the purpose of emphasis. It reads, literally, 'All the children of Israel did as Yahweh commanded Moses and Aaron, thus they did.' The very construction and vocabulary of the verse constitute an expression idiomatic in the book of Exodus (see 7:10; 12:28 and commentary on 7:6). This characteristic style signifies absolute obedience to the Word of God.

12:51. And it came to pass on this very day that Yahweh brought out the children of Israel from the land of Egypt according to their hosts.

See analysis of verses 40–41.

13:1–2. And Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, 'Consecrate to me every first-born. The first opening of the womb among the children of Israel, whether man or animal, belongs to me.'

A general principle is now stated by direct word of God to Moses. Every first-born male, human or animal, is to be 'consecrated' to God. This verb literally means 'to set apart'. In this verse it is in the Piel imperative form, so it is a command to put something into action.

Perhaps this activity is a polemic against other ancient cultures of the Near East. Preferential status is known to have been accorded to the first-born son in Nuzi, Assyria, Syria, Babylonia and Palestine.

Special treatment and privileges were considered inherent in the position of first-born. In other words, the eldest male is born with certain rights, and thus he is set apart from birth. In this verse we see that the rights of the first-born are not intrinsic, but rather something bestowed by the hand of God.

The first two verses of chapter 13 appear to be out of place. Subsequent verses 3–10 revert to a discussion of Passover regulations. It is not until verse 11 that the author gives detail to the laws of the first-born. However, there is a significant connection between Passover and the consecration of the first-born. In Egypt, God had destroyed the first-born of the Egyptians, both man and beast; now he redeems Israel's first-born and they belong to him!

13:3. Then Moses said to the people, 'Remember this day on which you came out from Egypt, from the house of slaves, because by a strong hand Yahweh brought you out from this [place]. Yeast shall not be eaten.'

Now begins the third time that Moses gives regulations regarding the Passover. This is an example of repetition for the purpose of emphasis. Passover was the most remarkable day in the history of Israel. It was the birth of a nation no longer under the rod of oppression. Pesach symbolizes for the Hebrews the concepts of freedom, deliverance and redemption.

Moses' statement begins with the command to 'remember'. The Hebrew word is an infinitive absolute which is being used as an emphatic imperative. In such constructions, 'It predominantly expresses divine and/or prophetic commands.'

The land of Egypt is called 'the house of slaves'. Sarna makes an interesting comment about that nomenclature: 'It may derive from the Egyptian practice of settling the labour gangs in workmen's villages in proximity to the site of the project for which they were conscripted. These villages were wholly enclosed by walls. One such has been uncovered at Deir el-Medinah, near Thebes. It served the labourers engaged in the construction of royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings. To the Israelite conscripts, such a village may have appeared to be a gigantic 'slave house'.

13:4. 'Today, in the month of Abib, you are leaving.'

The month in which the exodus took place is called 'Abib'. This is a word used earlier of a barley crop being 'in the ear', that is, ripe for harvest (see 9:31). The Palestinian inscription called the Gezer Calendar (from c. 925 B.C.) also employs that term for the month of barley harvest. Historically, barley harvest in Palestine occurs during the month of April.

Verse 4 begins with the word 'today'. The Samaritan Hebrew Pentateuch would rather place it at the end of verse 3, which would then read, 'And no yeast shall be eaten today.' That emendation of the text is unnecessary because 'today' has been used elsewhere in the story precisely for the day of departure (12:41; 13:3).

13:5 'And it will come to pass when Yahweh brings you to the land of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, which he swore to your fathers to give to you, a land flowing with milk and honey, then you are to celebrate this service in this month.'

This is a basic reiteration of the promise of Exodus 3:8, 17. God is in the process of fulfilling his purposes that he had earlier given to his people. The only substantive difference between the present verse and the earlier ones is that the group called Perizzites is missing on this occasion. It is really not a problem, however, because the list is being used as a formula and it is unnecessary that every group be included each time it is quoted (see commentary on 3:8).

The words in Hebrew for 'you are to celebrate this service' are a construction that can be translated literally, 'and you are to serve the service'. Perhaps this is a word-play on verse 3 which calls Egypt 'the house of servants/slaves' (using a variation of the same words as here in verse 5). Again, one of the great issues of the book of Exodus is underscored: the Hebrews are no longer to serve the Egyptians, but now they are to serve Yahweh, and him alone.

13:6. 'Seven days you are to eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there will be a feast to Yahweh.'

The Septuagint and the Samaritan Hebrew Pentateuch both read, 'Six days you shall eat.' Apparently this translation was to keep the number of days in line with Deuteronomy 16:8 which says, 'Six days you shall eat.' However, elsewhere in the Torah the text stipulates seven days for not eating mätsäh (see Lev. 23:6).

This discrepancy is really not a problem. The difference simply revolves around whether or not the seventh day is to be included in the stricture against eating leavened bread. Obviously it is (see next verse), and at times that is assumed by the Torah while at other times it is not.

The number seven in Hebrew often symbolizes completeness. Here the Passover reaches its climax or crescendo on the seventh day. It is a festival day in which all the people gather for a sacred assembly (see Deut. 16:8 where the term ‘sacred assembly’ is used of the Passover event).

13:7. ‘Eat unleavened bread seven days. And yeast shall not be seen by you, nor any leaven seen by you in all your borders.’

See commentary on 12:15. The only addition to earlier regulations regarding unleavened bread is that previously the command was to keep yeast out of their homes. Here we see a further directive that prevents it from even being allowed within the ‘borders’ of the nation. This term is primarily used in the Old Testament of the outer boundaries of the territory that God gave to Israel in the land of Canaan (e.g., Josh. 12:2; 16:2–8).

13:8. ‘You shall tell your son on that day, saying, “[This is] on account of what Yahweh did for me when I came out from Egypt.”’

Redemption from Egypt must not only be recounted to children, but must also be explained to them.

Here is a simple justification for the celebration of the Passover throughout history: it is to recall what God had done for the Hebrews by rescuing them from Egypt. The catechism need not be more complex than this for children—the answer goes to the very heart of the issue: salvation.

Some grammarians see a textual corruption in the verse because of the use of the telic particle ‘on account of/so that/because’ as a relative pronoun. Although such usage is unusual, it is hardly a sign of a need for textual emendation. The verse makes perfectly good sense as it stands.

13:9. ‘It shall be for you as a sign on your hand and for a reminder between your eyes, so that the law of Yahweh will be in your mouth—because by a strong hand Yahweh brought you out from Egypt.’

According to Talmudic interpretation this is a reference to the precept of wearing phylacteries, that is, leather straps worn on the arms and head of a worshipper which contain copies of Exodus 13:1–10 and various other passages. Phylacteries are fitted on the person during morning prayers. Evidence for this practice derives from the Second Temple period, there being no confirmation of it from Old Testament times.

The command is probably to be understood metaphorically. Passover is thus to be before the eyes and upon the hands of the Hebrew. It has an ever-present status and significance.

13:10 ‘You must keep this ordinance according to its time from year to year.’

The final verse of the section enjoins the Hebrews to celebrate the Passover in perpetuity. It literally says they should keep the feast ‘from days to days’. On the last word is a directional η in Hebrew, and in this instance ‘The particle can mark forward progression through time.’ (Compare a similar usage in Judges 11:40.)

Application

In this section we are introduced for the first time to the concept of the first-born of Israel having been set apart, or consecrated, to God. They belong to him because he spared them in Egypt when he destroyed the first-born of the Egyptians (see discussion below in verses 10–16).

In the New Testament Jesus, Mary’s first-born son, is set apart, or sanctified, according to the commands laid down in Exodus: ‘And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every first-born male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”), and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord’ (Luke 2:22–24). Luke even quotes Exodus 13:2 in his description. Elsewhere Christ is called ‘the first-born among many brethren’ (Rom. 8:29).

Also in the New Testament, believers are accounted as first-born by virtue of their union with Christ. It is the church of the first-born that is set apart to God (Heb. 12:23). In fact, the name the New Testament writers often give to Christians is ‘saints’ (e.g., Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1). That word in Greek

literally means 'the set-apart ones'. Thus, Christians are in a special, set-apart relationship with the Creator. We are the first-born of Israel.